

The Routledge Companion to Theism



Edited by
Charles Taliaferro, Victoria S. Harrison, and Stewart Goetz

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The editors dedicate this work to their parents:
Champe and Margaret Taliaferro, Ian and Marjorie Harrison,
and Joseph and Virginia Goetz

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INTRODUCTION

*Charles Taliaferro, Victoria S. Harrison,
and Stewart Goetz*

“Theism” is the term introduced in the seventeenth century by Ralph Cudworth to describe the philosophy of God, according to which God is the creator and sustainer of the cosmos, all good, omnipresent, eternal or everlasting, omnipotent, omniscient, existing necessarily (or existing *a se*), and provident. “Theism” was further delineated in contrast to “deism” in holding that God has been, or is, revealed in the cosmos through human history and experience. Despite the fairly recent provenance of the term “theism,” and however we may wish to refine and clarify its definition, it is undeniable that theism has been a tectonic force shaping the intellectual and cultural histories of many parts of the world, and it has left an indelible mark on many areas of human thought and life. Consequently it is perhaps unsurprising that, from antiquity to the present day, and with varying degrees of intensity during different historical periods, theism has attracted critical scrutiny. It is not difficult to point out well-known philosophers who have disparaged theism. To take a recent example, John Searle makes this observation in a book subtitled “Philosophy in the Real World”:

In earlier generations, books like this one would have had to contain either an atheistic attack on or a theistic defense of traditional religion. Or at the very least, the author would have had to declare a judicious agnosticism. Two authors who wrote in a spirit in some ways similar to mine, John Stuart Mill and Bertrand Russell, mounted polemical and eloquent attacks on traditional religion. Nowadays nobody bothers, and it is considered in slightly bad taste to even raise the question of God’s existence. Matters of religion are like matters of sexual preference: they are not to be discussed in public, and even the abstract questions are discussed only by bores.

(Searle 1998: 34)

In his commentary on the work of Kant, Peter Strawson made a similar, dismissive, but perhaps somewhat less unpleasant observation: “It is with very moderate enthusiasm that a twentieth-century philosopher enters the field of philosophical theology, even to follow Kant’s exposure of its illusions” (Strawson 1966: 207).

However, a closer look at philosophy in the real world of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries suggests a different story about the relationship between theism, religion, and philosophy (as well as a different story about interest in the philosophy of sex, contra Searle, but that concerns a different matter!). Theism is very much a leading theme in contemporary academic philosophy, as well as a significant concern in public philosophy and for readers outside the academies of higher education. Ironically, the current

interest in theism has partly been fueled by a group of thinkers who have come to be known as “new atheists” (Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens). Public interest in the questions raised by theism has been stimulated by a barrage of books extolling the new atheism such as *Philosophers Without Gods* (Antony 2007), as well as by all the books that have been published in response to this trend, such as *God is Great, God is Good: Why Believing in God is Reasonable and Responsible* (Craig and Meister 2009) and *The Dawkins Delusion?* (McGrath and McGrath 2007). It seems legitimate to interpret the current popularity of atheist literature, as well as the wave of books written in response to it, as a sign of the vibrancy of theism. One might reflect that there are few newsworthy books tackling settled issues (such as a critique of the god Apollo or, to take a more recent example, a critique of Stalinism).

There is certainly, then, no lack of interest in religious—and especially theistic—belief today. This interest is evident in many domains, from popular radio and television shows, to the rarefied halls of the academy. Indeed, despite the best efforts of the new atheists and their ilk, and the flippancy of certain mid-twentieth-century philosophers such as Bertrand Russell (1957), it is no longer viable simply to dismiss theistic philosophy as unworthy of serious intellectual attention.

The atheist philosopher Quentin Smith observes that following the publication of some closely argued books in support of theism by leading philosopher Alvin Plantinga:

[I]t became apparent to the philosophical profession that realist theists were not outmatched by naturalists in terms of the most valued standards of analytic philosophy: conceptual precision, rigor of argumentation, technical erudition, and an in-depth defense of an original worldview . . . In philosophy, it became, almost overnight, “academically respectable” to argue for theism.

(Smith 2001: 2)

Notwithstanding Smith’s observation, many standard histories of philosophy still give the impression that the arguments for God’s existence were decisively refuted by David Hume and Immanuel Kant in the eighteenth century. And while in many popular Anglophone introductions to philosophy one might find a reprint of Anselm’s ontological argument and Aquinas’ “five ways,” sometimes described as proofs, it is rarer to find any indication that philosophers have made significant advances with these lines of reasoning since they were short-circuited by modern science, and the efforts of Hume and Kant. But these impressions are readily dismissed when one takes stock of the cutting-edge philosophical work that has re-invigorated virtually all the classical theistic arguments (as seen, for example, in the recent *Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* (Craig and Moreland 2009)). To some observers, this might not be surprising. There is a saying that old soldiers never die, they simply fade away, and it has been remarked that philosophical ideas are even worse than old soldiers: not only do they never die, they never even fade away! However, the increasing number of institutions (such as the Notre Dame Center for Philosophy of Religion and the British Society for Philosophy of Religion), journals (notably the *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, *Religious Studies*, *Faith and Philosophy*, and *Philosophia Christi*), and books, dedicated to the philosophy of religion is a sign of vigorous, growing interest in theism and other themes within the wider discipline. There is even a journal, *Philo*, dedicated to the critique of theism.

INTRODUCTION

Stepping back from the recent polemics on the theism–atheism–agnosticism frontier, and from the shifting terrain of the recent philosophical engagement with theism in academia, as mentioned above, one can also readily observe the momentous role of theism in the history of ideas. Theism has influenced aspects of human culture as diverse as the natural sciences, architecture, literature, and politics, and many more besides, as can be seen in the various chapters of this volume. Its influence has been so pervasive that there is no question that to understand our cultural, political, and intellectual histories we must seek to understand theism; this is as true of Europe and America as it is of India and Pakistan, for example. Unless we understand this past we are unlikely to be well positioned to get a clear view of our current global situation, let alone of the future prospects of those of the world's great civilizations that have survived into the second millennium of the Common Era.

The historical resilience of theism and the rigor of recent arguments in its defense notwithstanding, opinion remains polarized about the likely future role of theism on the global stage. And yet, even those who—despite waning evidence in support of the secularization thesis (see Harrison 2007)—remain convinced that religious belief is becoming steadily less significant as time goes on, still have good reasons to regard the investigation of theism as a matter of vital concern. As Roger Scruton opines:

Our most pressing philosophical need, it seems to me, is to understand the nature and significance of the force which once held our world together, and which is now losing its grip—the force of religion. It could be that religious belief will soon be a thing of the past; it is more likely, however, that beliefs with the function, structure and animus of religion will flow into the vacuum left by God. In either case, we need to understand the why and wherefore of religion. It is from religious ideas that the human world, and the subject who inhabits it, were made.

(Scruton 1996: 85–6)

In situating theism in the context of its different histories, and exploring the various intellectual and religious traditions in which it has been central, as well as reviewing some of the many areas of human concern to which it has contributed, the current volume should be of interest to theists, atheists, and agnostics alike. Wherever one stands on the question of God's existence, it is impossible to think seriously about a number of core issues of general concern unless one is prepared to engage with the concept of God. Even conceived of solely as a product of the human imagination, the idea of God remains a force to be reckoned with. One of the greatest living historians of philosophy, Sir Anthony Kenny, puts the matter this way:

If there is no God, then God is incalculably the greatest single creation of the human imagination. No other creation of the imagination has been so fertile of ideas, so great an inspiration to philosophy, to literature, to painting, sculpture, architecture, and drama. Set beside the idea of God, the most original inventions of mathematicians and the most unforgettable characters in drama are minor products of the imagination: Hamlet and the square root of minus one pale into insignificance by comparison.

(Kenny 1983: 59)

This book provides an accessible scholarly resource for those interested in theism. One purpose of it is to encourage more sophisticated and nuanced discussion of theism in the marketplace of ideas by helping to correct some popular misconceptions, such as that evident in Richard Dawkins' characterization of what he calls "The God Hypothesis": "There exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it" (Dawkins 2006: 31). There is much to object to in Dawkins' brief description of God (God as a superhuman?), but it is evident from his failure to include "goodness" in his characterization that his understanding of theism is deficient. Mainstream forms of theism hold, at their core, that God is worthy of the highest praise and is unsurpassably good (*optimus maximus*). In his classic book, *On Selfhood and Godhood*, C. A. Campbell aptly observes:

Theism in general proclaims that God is wholly perfect; and, as is entirely natural, it interprets this divine perfect[ion] in terms of "the highest we know" in human experience; applying to God accordingly, such concepts as those of goodness, wisdom and power in their highest manifestation.

(Campbell 1957: 307)

So, one of the motives of this book is to provide a corrective to inaccurate and misleading conceptions of theism.

There are two further reasons behind this companion. First, given that the practice of philosophy today is undertaken with a heightened awareness of the diversity of philosophical frameworks and methods, there is a need to exhibit such diversity when it comes to concepts of God (and different versions of theism and challenges to these). Second, there is the need to make clear that theism has played a role in a host of areas beyond the discipline of the philosophy of religion proper (see Taliaferro 2005). For example, within philosophy Hilary Putnam has argued that a widespread theory of truth (realism) presupposes a theistic worldview. He boldly declares that: "The whole content of realism lies in the claim that it makes sense to talk of a God's eye point of view" (Putnam 1990: 23). We do not assume here that Putnam is right, but we suggest that even if he might be right, then investigating the nature of theism could be an important component in sustained inquiry into the theory of truth, and other domains of philosophy.

Moving beyond the bounds of philosophy to sociology, we find that theism is also explanatorily relevant among sociologists who hypothesize about the origins of religion (see Schloss and Murray 2009). According to one explanation, genetic accident produced beings with a "hypersensitive agency detection device" that initially was triggered by certain environmental stimuli (for example, a rustling of branches on the side of the path ahead is hypothesized to be the result of a potential attacker) and resulted in increased survival and reproduction. However, because such a device was "hyperactive" and occasionally generated beliefs in agents that did not really exist, it was not always reliable (even though it was beneficial for survival purposes; better to be wrong on one occasion about an attacker in the bushes than completely oblivious to such a possibility). Thus, beings equipped with the device came to hypothesize the existence of a God to explain appearances of design among objects and events in the natural world (such as certain complexities in organisms and regularities of motions of bodies in the heavens). In the minds of some sociologists, however, the truth of theism is an even better explanatory hypothesis than accidental genetic change. For example, with regard to the

origin of religion the sociologist Christian Smith argues that a more plausible theory states that “human religions have existed and do exist pervasively because a God really does exist, and most humans feel a recurrent and deeply compelling desire to know and worship, in various ways, the God who is there” (Smith 2003: 114).

In short, because theism is alive and well in disciplines both within and beyond the confines of the philosophy of religion, it warrants serious discussion and examination by scholars from a wide spectrum of backgrounds in a volume such as this one.

The five parts of this volume each address a different dimension of theism—historical, academic, social and political, cultural, and experiential. Taken together they comprise a sustained examination of the nature and plausibility of theism as well as a review of its implications for culture, values, politics, science and other domains of inquiry.

Part I, “What is Theism?,” begins with two survey chapters examining, in historical context, how theism has played into Western (dealt with by Graham Oppy) and Indian (covered by Matthew Dasti) philosophical traditions. Seven chapters follow, each exploring the most prominent forms taken by the belief in a Creator God, highlighting the relationship of faith, or religious belief, and reason. First, the Abrahamic theisms are covered (in chapters by Jerome Gellman, William J. Wainwright, and Oliver Leaman, respectively); then, turning to the Indian sub-continent, Chapter 6 reviews the various forms theism has taken in Hindu theologies (contributed by David Lawrence), which is followed by a chapter (by Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh) on the form of theism found within Sikhism. In Chapter 8, Segun Gbadegesin offers an insightful treatment on theism in Africa, while Chapter 9, by Peter B. Clarke, reviews theism in New Religious Movements. Part I also includes three chapters (by Geoffrey Gorham, Jacqueline Mariña, and Chad Meister, respectively) providing an historical overview of the ways in which theism has impacted on intellectual life, broadly construed, from the seventeenth to the twenty-first century.

In Part II, “Theism and Inquiry,” the implications of theism for a broad range of areas of inquiry in both the humanities and the natural sciences are assessed. The chapters in this part include, but go far beyond, an investigation into arguments for and against theism. The section begins with a chapter on Evidence (by John Bishop), which sets the scene for the chapters which follow by providing an incisive account of the variety of ways available for thinking about the notion of evidence and its possible bearing upon theism. The 17 chapters that follow fill out the picture by each focusing on a specific area of contemporary intellectual interest, for example, cosmology (see [Chapter 18](#) by Hans Halverson and Helge Kragh), and critically examining the interface between it and theistic belief. Some of the chapters in this part focus explicitly on particular academic disciplines, for instance, Psychology (by Beverley Clack) or Sociology (contributed by Steve Fuller). Others focus on more abstract areas of intellectual concern that are relevant to a broad spectrum of disciplines, such as the chapters on Moral Inquiry (by Michael W. Austin) and Philosophical Methodology (by contributing editor Charles Taliaferro). The part concludes, appropriately, with a chapter (contributed by James Porter Moreland) that elaborates a contemporary understanding of human nature and examines the implications of that for the plausibility of theistic belief.

Part III, “Theism and the Socio-Political Realm,” moves on from the more abstract topics considered in Part II and turns critical attention to some of the ways in which theistic belief and practice have intersected with thought and practice relating to specific issues central to the social and political domains. For example, Chapter 31 (by Edward Langerak) takes up the question, historically and philosophically, of the extent

to which theism has or could inform a robust account of the nature of civil society. Chapter 32 (contributed by Michael J. Perry) examines how theism has impacted upon theories of human rights. These chapters provide the context within which a series of other similarly practical topics are reviewed: War (by Asa Kasher); Law (by Daniel N. Robinson); Feminism (by Pamela Sue Anderson); Religious Diversity (by contributing editor Victoria S. Harrison); Globalization (by H. E. Baber); and Education (by David Carr). These are followed by three chapters that take a broader approach to the topic by bringing in considerations to do with the biological underpinning of the life we share with non-human animals. The first of these (contributed by Paul Copan) examines the implications of theistic belief for views on bioethics, particularly concerning issues about the value of life and the circumstances in which life may be ended. The second (by Stephen R. L. Clark) takes us beyond narrow anthropological concerns and explores the theological dimensions of the way we think, or ought to think, about the non-humans with which we share the planet. A final chapter (by Holmes Rolston, III) highlights the religious significance of the environment within which we and other sentient and non-sentient beings live out our lives. All of the issues addressed in this part are of immediate and obvious theoretical and practical importance within the socio-political environment of the twenty-first century. Indeed reflection upon them might well be vital for the future of our current civilization and, indeed, of our planet.

We return to the domain of human culture in Part IV, "Theism and Culture." Picking up on the theme of environment from the final chapter of Part III, this part begins with a chapter on Architecture (by David Brown), which applies critical attention to some of the ways in which theism has impacted the built environment within which we house ourselves and conduct our day-to-day activities. This is followed by a chapter on "Aesthetics" (contributed by Mark Wynn) which considers, among other things, the significance of our embodiment for our possible grasp of the divine through aesthetic experience. Chapter 44, "Literature" (by Douglas Hedley) focuses on the literary arts and the fecund impact of theism on these. It would be impossible to contemplate the relationship of theism and culture for long without noting the remarkable cross-fertilization of theology and music. Some of the connections between these are highlighted in Chapter 45 "Music" (contributed by John B. Foley, S. J.). While it might be the case that the most significant impact of theism on music happened in the past, this cannot be said of the topic treated in the Chapter 46 (by R. Douglas Geivett). Film is a quintessentially modern medium and an analysis of the way that theism, and ideas associated with it, have been portrayed in the cinema can tell us a great deal about contemporary understandings (and misunderstandings!) of theism. The final chapter in this part, "Narrative" (by Anthony Rudd), brings together a number of the themes raised in the other chapters. Arguably, the arts, particularly literature and cinema, only make sense within a narrative context. Our lives, too, it can again be argued, only make sense when viewed within the framework provided by a narrative. This chapter reviews some of the ways such narratives might be elaborated from a theistic perspective, and in doing so it prepares the way for Part V of the volume, "Theism as a Way of Life."

Part V is, in many respects, the climax of the volume. For after all, theism is not just an abstract idea, or a collection of ideas, but it informs ways of life. The topics included in this part have been selected because they each address theistic belief as it comes to contemporary expression in the lives of individuals and communities. Chapter 48 (by David O'Hara) discusses the ways in which theistic belief can give shape to the communities within which we live, and in doing so can structure and give meaning to the

lives that we lead. This is followed by a chapter (contributed by Timothy Chappell) that critically reflects on the theist's experience within history. Considered from the vantage point of a particular place within the stream of time, it may be that a theist's confidence and trust in God leads her to evaluate situations—especially existentially trying ones—differently to the way someone who did not share her theistic perspective would. But this could be appropriate given her theistic belief and her range of experiences. The experience of living a theistically informed way of life is elaborated further in Chapter 50 “Spirituality” (by John Cottingham). This fills out the picture of what it might mean in practice to live one's life in a way that takes seriously the personal implications of belief in a Creator God. But does possession of such a belief make one happy? This is one of the questions addressed in the next chapter, on Happiness (by Suzanne Lock). Matters take a further step towards the concrete issues affecting embodied beings such as ourselves in Chapter 52 (by Brenda Wirkus) which tackles some of the issues that arise when one thinks about theism and sex in the same breath. Bringing us a step closer to the volume's conclusion, a chapter on Irony (contributed by Matthew Dickerson) reminds us that—whatever else the theist's God might be—God could well turn out to be the Master of Irony. In conclusion, in a chapter contributed by one of the volume's editors (Stewart Goetz), the relation between theism and the meaning of life is scrutinized.

The authors included in this volume do not share a single view of the subject matter but approach their topics from the vantage point of their own academic specialties and personal convictions. It is our hope that taken together these chapters will contribute to the contemporary discussion of theism by stimulating the ongoing debate about it and raising awareness of the intellectual and practical issues that it raises.

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Part I

WHAT IS THEISM?

1

WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

Graham Oppy

I begin with a very brief, very general outline of the history of Western philosophical treatments of theism. I then discuss contributions to this history from pagans, Jews, Muslims, Christians, and non-believers. Finally, I make some comments about the range of conceptions of God that is evident in this history.

Historical Outline

Western philosophy emerged in ancient Greece in predominantly polytheistic cultures. The ideas of the various schools of Greek philosophy shaped the intellectual histories of the lands that were subsequently conquered by the Romans. When Christianity rose to be the dominant religion in the declining Roman Empire, the primary intellectual task became the integration of revealed Christian doctrine with that Greek philosophical inheritance. However, after the collapse of the Roman Empire much of the Greek philosophical inheritance became inaccessible to Christian thinkers, and was preserved primarily in the vibrant intellectual climate of the Muslim world. From the Muslim world, that preserved philosophical inheritance then made its way back into Christian intellectual life around the time of the rise of universities, and contributed significantly to a philosophical flowering that has continued to the present day.

While the task of integrating revealed Christian doctrine with Greek philosophical inheritance remained the primary intellectual task throughout much of the extraordinarily fertile heyday of Scholastic philosophy, the primacy of that task came to be questioned more insistently around the time of the dawning of the Renaissance. Rather than suppose that philosophy is entirely subservient to theology, more Christian thinkers came to accept the ancient Greek view that the primary intellectual task is to understand the world and our place in it—a task that, at least in principle, is capable of being pursued without reference to revealed Christian doctrine. As one element in a brew that contributed to serious political turmoil in Christendom, Renaissance Humanism helped to pave the way both for the Reformation and for the rise of modern philosophy and modern science.

As modern philosophy moved towards its culmination in the Enlightenment, its practitioners deemed themselves freer to follow where they took the dictates of reason to lead. For many, this was a version of deism and natural religion; but eventually, for some—and many would put Hume in this category, although others would demur—it was either agnosticism or atheism. Thereafter, the story of theism in Western philosophy becomes a story of many different movements, with very different approaches and views.

Much post-Enlightenment philosophy has been hostile to theism. Materialism, naturalism, positivism, and numerous kinds of criticism have all fueled agnostic and atheist positions. Developments in the sciences—such as Darwinian evolutionary theory—and in the humanities—for example, the search for the historical Jesus and higher Biblical criticism—have been taken to underwrite those views. Very recently, “new atheists,” such as Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens, have extended hostility to all manifestations of religion (see Dawkins 2006; Dennett 2006; Harris 2004 and 2006; Hitchens 2007). (For criticism of the “new” atheism, see, for example, McGrath and McGrath 2007.)

But, of course, much post-Enlightenment philosophy has been friendly to theism. Idealism—both Romantic and Absolute—attracted some theists (as well as some who were looking for substitutes for theism). Much the same can be said for phenomenology, existentialism, structuralism, deconstructionism, and various kinds of postmodernism. Moreover, largely in circles occupied by analytic philosophers, there has been a considerable recent renewal of enthusiasm for large parts of Scholastic philosophy. And some—notably Thomists—have maintained a tradition that is continuous with the high points of Scholasticism.

Pagans

There is a theistic tradition that runs through ancient Greek and Roman thought, centered primarily on Plato (429–347 BCE) and Platonism. Perhaps there are antecedents for this tradition in even earlier thinkers, such as Xenophanes (570–480 BCE). However, there is a clear line of pagan thinkers, who defend a kind of theism, from Plato through to the neo-Platonists of late antiquity—in this line we find, for example, Plutarch (c.45–120 CE), Plotinus (c.204–70 CE), Porphyry (232–305 CE), and Proclus (411–85 CE). Of course, many contemporary theists will insist that the being that the neo-Platonists called “The One” and “The Good” differs in various ways from their God; but there have also been countless Christians down the centuries who have been prepared to say that their God is “The One” and “The Good.”

There are many other channels in Greek and Roman thought that trafficked in talk about God and the gods. Some ancient thinkers were pantheists or panentheists (for example, the Stoics—such as Chrysippus (c.279–c.206 BCE)—are perhaps in this camp). Some ancient thinkers were polytheists (arguably, for example, the Pythagoreans—such as Pythagoras (fl. 520 BCE)—and the Epicureans—notably Epicurus (341–c.270 BCE)). Some ancient thinkers were skeptics, and their skepticism extended to God and the gods (for instance, perhaps, Cicero (106–43 BCE) and Sextus Empiricus (possibly second century CE)). The Greek and Roman legacies included a rich diversity of views of God and the gods and an extended record of discussion and debate about these views and related matters.

Aristotle (384–322 BCE) was a source for many Scholastic arguments for the existence of God, and yet it is not clear whether he is properly classed as a theist. On the one hand, Aristotle seems to have been a polytheist: he took for granted the existence of the gods in the Greek pantheon. On the other hand, in the development of his cosmology, Aristotle was led to the postulation of a Prime Mover of the celestial spheres, and he attributed to the Prime Mover various properties that subsequent Christians attributed to God: for example, incorporeality, immutability, and absence of potentiality. As we remarked above in connection with Platonism and neo-Platonism, there are many contemporary theists who would insist that Aristotle’s Prime Mover differs in various ways

from their God; but there have also been countless Christians down the centuries who have been prepared to say that their God is the Prime Mover.

Jews

While there have been long periods in which Jewish thinkers have contributed little to the main threads of Western philosophy, there have been a number of Jewish thinkers who have made seminal contributions. I shall mention just a few of them here.

Philo (c.15 BCE–50 CE) exerted a significant influence on subsequent *Christian* thought, primarily because he was recognized as one of the first to undertake the task of integrating revealed doctrine with the then still developing legacy of Greek philosophy. In particular, Philo developed a method of allegorical interpretation of scripture that enabled him to “find” Greek philosophical doctrines in the Hebrew Scriptures. This work was a model for early Christian theologians and exegetes. And Philo also developed a theory of the Logos that had some intriguing affinities with Gospel accounts.

During the centuries in which the Muslim world was pre-eminent, there were a number of very significant Jewish philosophers, including: Isaac Israeli (c.855–c.955), Saadia (c.822–942), and Avicebrol (1021–58). The most influential Medieval Jewish philosopher was Maimonides (1138–1204); and the most notable to have lived in the Christian West was Gersonides (1288–1344). Isaac Israeli and Avicebrol played an important role in the transmission and revival of neo-Platonism in the Christian West; and Gersonides and (especially) Maimonides were key players in the popularization of Aristotle’s works between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries.

Spinoza (1632–77) is one of the most controversial figures in philosophy. He was a scathing critic of traditional religion, a determinist, and a proponent of pantheism (or something very much like it). However, on his account, he was a religious reformer rather than an enemy of religion. Moreover, his abiding preoccupations were as much political as they were metaphysical: he wrote against the background of prolonged religious conflict, and expressly favored democratic and republican institutions that promoted religious tolerance.

The twentieth century threw up a diverse range of Jewish philosophers; I mention just three here. Martin Buber (1878–1965) is noted primarily for his preoccupation with God’s relationship to human beings (though he also collected Hasidic tales, and wrote extensively on the Bible, Zionism, philosophical anthropology, and other topics). Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) is one of the greatest of all philosophers, and his conception of religious belief has cast a very large shadow—see, for example, Malcolm (1993), Philips (1993) and Arrington and Addis (2001). Emmanuel Levinas (1906–95) studied phenomenology under Edmund Husserl, and was himself a significant influence on Jacques Derrida and a generation of French philosophers.

As suggested by my initial remarks in this section, there is no genuine narrative thread to the Jewish contribution to Western philosophical thought about theism.

Muslims

The Muslim world produced a large number of first-rate philosophers between the eighth and twelfth centuries. While these philosophers were mostly from Persia—centered in and around Baghdad—there were also some from the further reaches of the Muslim empire, in Northern Africa and Southern Spain. Perhaps the most significant

of the great Muslim philosophers are: Alkindi (d. 870), Alfarabi (870–950), Avicenna (980–1037), Algazali (1058–1111), and Averroes (1126–98).

Alkindi was a polymath who played a key role in the transmission of Greek philosophy to the Muslim world. He translated many of the key texts into Arabic, and developed an Arabic philosophical vocabulary that was taken over by many of his successors. Moreover, his attempts to incorporate Aristotelian and neo-Platonic doctrines into Muslim philosophy were widely favorably regarded.

Alfarabi was also a polymath, noted for his attempts to make Aristotelian syllogistic logic accessible to those who spoke only Arabic. Although he promoted Aristotelian—or, at any rate, neo-Aristotelian—doctrines, he held that Aristotle’s conception of the Prime Mover required neo-Platonic supplementation, in order to bring it into line with the conception of God that is provided in the Old Testament.

Avicenna was yet another polymath, perhaps most famous for his contributions to medicine. He attempted to give a proof of the existence of God based on his metaphysical views concerning the distinction between existence and essence. Avicenna held the controversial view that unaided philosophical inquiry yields precise truths about the existence and nature of God, the creation of the world, the fate of human beings, and so forth—truths that are perhaps only obscurely implicit in scripture.

Algazali provided a significantly different orientation to Islamic philosophy. He was a skeptical and severe critic of the views of his predecessors (in, for example, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*). His systematic Sufism owed much less to inheritance from the Greeks, though some of Avicenna’s ideas found a place in his “occasionalism.”

Averroes was the last great Muslim philosophical polymath. He responded to Algazali’s attack on Aristotelianism with *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*, in which he argued both that Algazali’s arguments were no good, and that he was attacking a straw man. Averroes reversed Avicenna’s claim that essence precedes existence, and developed his own proofs of the existence of God on this alternative foundation. Perhaps most controversially, Averroes held that theology is subordinate to philosophy, since only the latter can yield demonstrative knowledge.

Other Muslim philosophers who might have been discussed here include: Albumasar (787–886), Alrazi (870–950), Alhacen (965–1040) and Avempace (d. 1139).

Christians

The letters of the apostle Paul (c.2–c.64 CE) involve an interesting fusion of Jewish traditions with elements of Greek philosophy, particularly Stoic and later Platonic moral psychology. The earliest Christian philosophers—Justin (d. 168 CE), Irenaeus (d. 202 CE), Clement (150–212 CE), Tertullian (155–230 CE) and Origen (185–255 CE)—also drew on a range of Stoic and Platonic sources, but they all took the view that Christianity was a corrective to the errors of pagan philosophers: none of the Greeks had a correct conception of God. Of course, the Christian conception of God was itself a work in progress; and, during the period of the first two Councils—at Nicaea (325 CE) and Constantinople (381 CE)—there were significant developments in the Christian conception of God in the thinking of the Doctors of the Western Church—Ambrose (c.337–97 CE), Augustine (354–430 CE) and Jerome (347–420 CE)—and the Doctors of the Eastern Church—Athanasius (293–373 CE), John Chrysostom (317–407 CE), Basil the Great (330–79 CE), Gregory of Nazianus (329–89 CE), and the third of the Cappadocian fathers, Gregory of Nyssa (c.335–c.395 CE).

Between the Council at Chalcedon (451) and the end of the first millennium, there was not a lot of influential philosophical activity. The *Corpus Dionysiacum* was written sometime soon after 500 CE, and Boethius (480–525) wrote the *Consolations of Philosophy* just prior to his death. John Philoponus (490–570) was an interesting critic of Aristotle and Proclus (though he had the posthumous misfortune to be declared anathema). Gregory the Great (540–604), while recognized as a Father and Doctor of the Western Church, was notable for his leadership, administration, and diplomacy rather than for the subtlety of his thought. Isidore of Seville (c.560–636) and Maximus the Confessor (580–662) were among those who studied the *Corpus Dionysiacum*, and who preserved and interpreted late neo-Platonism. Eriugena (800–77) stands out as another significant translator of, and commentator upon, the *Corpus Dionysiacum*.

Early in the new millennium, we find Peter Damian (1007–72) making vilificatory claims about philosophy. The fathers of Scholasticism—Anselm (1033–1109) and Abelard (1079–1142)—both arrived at a much higher estimation of the virtues of philosophy, and prompted a new emphasis on reason and argumentation. (Anselm had access to Augustine and Boethius, including Boethius’ translations of Aristotle; Abelard also relied on Cicero and Porphyry.) Of course, the new estimation of the virtues of philosophy had its detractors, most visibly in the persecution of Abelard by Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153).

The twelfth century represented an important period of transition. The schools came to be conceived of as places whose business was not solely—or even primarily—the transmission of received lore, but rather as places where new knowledge could be received and examined. Knowledge of fragments of Greek and Arabic philosophy and science fed a thirst for more of the same, leading both to a radical overhaul of curriculum and to the rediscovery or recovery of ancient texts, including, most significantly, the works of Aristotle. Alexander of Hales (1185–1245) was one of the first to engage with Aristotle’s metaphysics (and he also influenced the future direction of Scholasticism by deciding to use the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard (1095–1160) as the basic theological textbook). William of Auvergne (1190–1249) was one of the first thinkers to make systematic use of Greek and Islamic philosophical sources.

Engagement with the works of Aristotle was one of the dominant motifs of philosophy in the thirteenth century. Before the middle of the century, curricula in faculties of arts had come to be modeled around the works of Aristotle. Albertus Magnus (1200–80) commented on almost the entire Aristotelian corpus. Siger of Brabant (c.1240–82) was condemned primarily because he held that the study of Aristotle was a worthwhile pursuit in its own terms—that is, independent of whatever benefits might flow to theology—and was taken by some to be repeating Averroes’ claim that theology is subordinate to philosophy. Roger Bacon (1214–92) claimed that at least experimental science could be taken to be independent of Aristotelian theory. On the other hand, Aquinas (c.1224–74) held that in cases in which there is conflict between empirical science and fundamental Aristotelian teachings, one should ignore the empirical science: for instance, the superior predictive power of Ptolemaic astronomy does not suffice to trump the metaphysical certitude of Aristotle’s cosmology. More broadly, Bonaventure (1217–74) insisted that there are certain fundamental intellectual tasks that philosophy cannot carry out unaided—for example, guidance of men towards happiness and disclosure of the ultimate foundation of knowledge.

The latter half of the thirteenth century and the first half of the fourteenth century witnessed the full flowering of medieval Scholastic philosophy, in the works of Meister

Eckhardt (1260–1328), Duns Scotus (1266–1308), William of Ockham (1285–1347), John Buridan (c.1295–1361), Adam of Wodeham (d. 1358), and numerous others. Many of the major figures in this period were nominalists or otherwise less than fully fledged realists about universals, taking stances on a dispute that endured from the very early medieval period. Some figures went much further in their rejection of metaphysical entities—such as Nicholas of Autrecourt (c.1300–50), who was sometimes referred to as “the Hume of the Middle Ages.”

The period from the middle of the fourteenth century to the middle of the fifteenth century—the beginnings of the Renaissance—threw up some particularly interesting figures. Nicole Oresme (1320–82) was a scientist and mathematician who was convinced of the regularity of nature and who, in consequence, warned against those who were quick to appeal to magical and supernatural explanations of natural events. John Wyclif (1320–84) was a reactionary Augustinian who opposed what he took to be the intellectual and political corruption that had taken possession of the Church in the fourteenth century. Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64) was a leading polymath, who made significant contributions to mathematics and theology (as well as inspired scientific guesses—for example, that the earth does not occupy a privileged position in the universe, and does not follow a circular orbit around the sun).

Some key figures in the period from the middle of the fifteenth century to the middle of the sixteenth century were rather idiosyncratic. Erasmus of Rotterdam (1467–1536) was a Renaissance humanist, a devotee of the great Greek and Roman authors, and a vigorous opponent of the “speculative sciences” of medieval universities (meaning, in part, that he was much more Platonist than Aristotelian); and, of course, his publication of an annotated New Testament with Greek text was pivotal for the coming Reformation. Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) criticized the role of Christian religion in then extant republics, and looked with admiration at the role that pagan religion had played in Roman times. However, the most significant figures in this period were the architects of the Reformation: Martin Luther (1483–1546) and John Calvin (1509–64). Luther was very critical of the synthesis of Aristotelian philosophy and Christian theology; he was critical of reason and philosophy, but offered a revised conception of the role of rationality in theology. Calvin produced a compendium of Reformed theology—*The Institutes of the Christian Religion*—that also evinced hostility towards reason and philosophy, though it contained the seeds of what later came to be called “reformed epistemology.”

Interesting figures in the latter half of the sixteenth century include Michel de Montaigne (1533–92) and Francisco Suarez (1548–1617). Montaigne is difficult to pigeon-hole. His essays yield a cultivated examination of religion, in which he provides pointed criticisms of many aspects of contemporary religions, skeptically reserves judgment on claims to religious truth, but insists on humanistic study of religion as a way of enlarging experience and knowledge of human life. Suarez, from the School of Salamanca was one of the last and greatest Scholastic thinkers. His *Disputationes Metaphysicae* is a magisterial discussion of metaphysics, including a careful discussion of the nature and existence of God, whom he supposes to be perfect, infinite, simple, immutable, eternal, incomprehensible, and ineffable. Suarez’s conception of God is continuous with conceptions of God throughout the medieval period.

Some of the most famous names in Western philosophy belong to the seventeenth century. All were theists—even Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), whose materialism prompted feverish system building among many of his suspicious contemporaries and

successors. Some—such as Benjamin Whichcote (1609–83), Ralph Cudworth (1617–88), Henry More (1614–87), and the other Cambridge Platonists—believed in the harmony of religion and mystically conceived reason. Others—perhaps most notably René Descartes (1596–1650), John Locke (1632–1704), Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715), Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), and George Berkeley (1685–1753)—erected philosophical systems in which God and other non-material entities played pivotal roles. Yet others—such as Blaise Pascal (1623–77)—eschewed philosophical systems, yet made lasting contributions to philosophical reflection on God and religion. The seventeenth century also witnessed the beginnings of deism—a rather minimal kind of theism—in the works of Herbert of Cherbury (1583–1648), Matthew Tindal (1657–1733), John Toland (1670–1722), and many others.

The second half of the eighteenth century is dominated by David Hume (1711–76) and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Of course, there were many other notable philosophers who contributed to philosophical reflection on God and religion during the eighteenth century—for example, Voltaire (1694–1778), Jonathan Edwards (1703–58), Thomas Reid (1710–96), Denis Diderot (1713–84), Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–81), and William Paley (1743–1805)—but Hume’s skepticism and Kant’s deism reflected a fairly widespread dissatisfaction with organized religion and traditional metaphysical conceptions of God. Moreover, Kant’s transcendental idealism—and his attempted overcoming of disputes between rationalists and empiricists—served as the backdrop for philosophical discussion well into the next century.

“Criticism” provides one organizing motif for thought about God and religion in the nineteenth century. “Higher criticism” developed over the course of the century, drawing on the thought of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), David Strauss (1808–74), Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72), Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), and many others. Feuerbach developed the idea that divine attributes are “projections” of human attributes, and laid the foundations for the more critical views of thinkers such as Karl Marx (1818–83) and Friedrich Engels (1820–95).

“Idealism” provides a second organizing motif for thought about God and religion in the nineteenth century. Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), Friedrich Schelling (1775–1854) and G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831) all played significant roles in the development of “Absolute Idealism”—a philosophy that has affinities with the views of thinkers such as Meister Eckhardt and Spinoza, but which might more properly be supposed to be pantheistic rather than theistic. Absolute Idealism became the dominant philosophical position in Britain—in the thought of such philosophers as Thomas Hill Green (1836–82), Edward Caird (1835–1908), Francis Herbert Bradley (1846–1924), and Bernard Bosanquet (1848–1923)—and it also rose to prominence in the United States—in, for example, the thought of Josiah Royce (1855–1916).

Other thought about God and religion in the nineteenth century was more resistant to classification. Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) approved of the spiritual concerns of the “pessimistic” religions—Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity—but rejected their established metaphysics. Auguste Comte (1798–1857) opposed all theology—on positivistic grounds—but hoped for the establishment of a “secular religion of humanity” that could legitimately occupy the social ground inadequately held by historical religions. John Henry Newman (1801–90), in his *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, developed views about the justification of religious belief that received little serious attention from philosophers until nearly a century after their initial airing. Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–82) developed views—concerning unity and “the over-soul”

that had some affinity with Absolute Idealism—but was primarily concerned to emphasize the value of spontaneous and untutored “illumination.” John Stuart Mill (1806–73) appears to have been an agnostic who professed great admiration for the moral character of Christ but promoted the virtues of something like Comte’s “religion of humanity.” Charles Darwin (1809–82) was at least an agnostic and, of course, a scientist: he was well aware that many would take his evolutionary theory to have negative implications for their religious beliefs. Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55) is almost impossible to précis: his complex writings have been variously labeled “existentialist,” “humanist,” “moralist,” “individualist,” “post-modernist,” and so forth. Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) professed belief in the reality of God, but supposed that religious belief is primarily significant for the kinds of human conduct that it underwrites. William James (1842–1910) shared Peirce’s pragmatic approach to religion—and his profession of belief in God—but supposed that mystical experience lies at the core of theistic belief.

Philosophical reflection on God and religion in the twentieth century is even more diverse than that of the preceding century: the following selection is partial, and perhaps not representative. Henri Bergson (1859–1941) appears to have been a theist—and to have converted from Judaism to Catholicism late in life—though his tendency to embrace apparently contradictory positions makes his thought difficult to summarize. John Dewey (1859–1952) thought of God as “the active relation between the ideal and the actual,” a conception that allowed him to emphasize the virtues of “religious experience” while repudiating organized religion and the supernatural. Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) and Charles Hartshorne (1897–2000) developed a novel “process” conception of God that rejected key parts of the traditional Scholastic conception—for example, that God is changeless, simple and non-temporal. Max Scheler (1874–1928) developed a phenomenological account of religious experience, according to which God is disclosed as real only in “reactions of faith in God.” Jacques Maritain (1882–1973) was a convert to Catholicism who philosophized under the shadow of Aquinas. Karl Jaspers (1883–1969) thought of God as something like “absolute transcendence,” at best indirectly signposted by religions and religious faith. Paul Tillich (1886–1965) identified God with “being itself,” the absolutely unconditioned and ineffable ultimate object of all desire and aspiration. Karl Barth (1886–1968) produced a massive, unfinished, thirteen-volume expression of “Christian belief” under the title *Church Dogmatics*. Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) was a Catholic philosopher, though he appears to have thought that philosophy has nothing to say about relations between God and humanity. Simone Weil (1909–43) seems to have held that God is literally inconceivable but certainly not illusory. William Alston (1921–2009) developed an epistemological theory according to which beliefs about the nature of God can be justified on the grounds of putative perceptions of God. John Hick (b. 1922) defends a religious pluralism according to which all of the world’s great religions refer to the same ineffable ultimate reality. Mary Daly (1928–2010) reconceived God—the most ultimate and intimate reality—from a radical feminist perspective. Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) wrote quite extensively about God and religion, but his writing resists easy encapsulation: he might have been an atheist, but—on his own terms—he would not have been able to say so. Alvin Plantinga (b. 1932) holds that God is a necessarily existent, essentially omnipotent, essentially omniscient, essentially morally perfect person, and that Christian belief in God is warranted if God exists. Richard Swinburne (b. 1934), an Anglican convert to the Eastern Orthodox Church, defends the existence of an unembodied person who is eternal, perfectly free, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and the creator of all things.

Macquarrie (1971) affords some idea of the diversity of Christian thought in the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. This diversity continues unabated.

Non-Believers

Tracing the history of non-belief in the West is not easy. At least prior to the Enlightenment, accusations of non-belief are often more properly classified as accusations of unorthodox or heretical belief. It is obvious that Arianism, Macedonianism, Nestorianism, Pelagianism, Monophysitism, Monothelitism, Monoenergism, and so forth are versions of theism; it is just as obvious that deism is a form of theism. While the emergence of deism in the seventeenth century marked a clear threat to organized religion, this did not—in itself—constitute the emergence of non-belief (atheism or agnosticism).

There are figures in antiquity, such as Diagoras of Melos (fl. 420 BCE) and Theodorus of Cyrene (c.340–c.250 BCE), who were called “atheists.” However, it is not clear whether they were really atheists, or whether they merely failed to believe in the gods of their cities.

Clear cases of atheism do emerge in the seventeenth century. Kazimierz Łyszczyński (1634–89) was condemned and executed for his treatise on the non-existence of God. Jean Meslier (1664–1729)—who was forced into the priesthood against his will by his father—bequeathed to posterity a lengthy manuscript in which he argued a case for atheism (in which considerations about evil played a significant role).

Figures in the eighteenth century who have been linked to atheism (or agnosticism) include Julian Offray de la Mettrie (1709–51), Claude Adrien Helvétius (1715–71), Baron d'Holbach (1723–89), and the Marquis de Condorcet (1743–94). As noted above, it is controversial whether David Hume should be added to this list.

There are many figures in the nineteenth century who are properly classified as atheists (or agnostics). Famously, Marx and Engels argued that religion is a legitimate expression of class oppression, and claimed that both the expression and its cause would wither away with communist revolution. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) provided notable “psychological” critiques of religion, in “The Antichrist” and elsewhere. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) argued that religious belief is an illusion that we take on to cope with existential fears (particularly concerning death). Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) and Max Weber (1864–1920) pioneered the sociological study of religion; Durkheim—perhaps echoing Feuerbach—claimed that God is society writ large. (Other nineteenth-century figures that might be mentioned here include: Friedrich Karl Forberg (1770–1848), Harriet Martineau (1802–76), Bruno Bauer (1809–82), Mikhael Bakunin (1814–76), Ludwig Büchner (1824–99), Thomas Huxley (1825–95), and William Clifford (1845–79).)

Perhaps the best-known atheist philosophers in the twentieth century are Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) and Alfred Jules Ayer (1910–89). Russell wrote extensively on religion; while he argued strongly against theism, he was sympathetic to Comte’s search for a secular substitute for the institutions of organized religion. Ayer famously denied that the propositions of religion and metaphysics are meaningful—we cannot even make sense of the claim that God exists. (Among the many other figures who might be included in a discussion of twentieth-century atheism and agnosticism, there are at least the following: Karl Popper (1902–94), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80), Simone de Beauvoir (1908–86), Albert Camus (1913–60), John Leslie Mackie (1917–81), Gilles Deleuze (1925–95), Michel Foucault (1926–84), Kai Nielsen (b. 1926), Noam Chomsky

(b. 1928), Bernard Williams (1929–2003), Michael Martin (b. 1932), David Lewis (1941–2001), Evan Fales (b. 1943), Peter Singer (b. 1946), and Michel Onfre (b. 1958).)

One interesting feature of the history of non-belief is the persistence of arguments against the very possibility of non-belief. As Berman (1988) documents, it was a staple of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Christian authors to assert that there simply cannot be *theoretical* atheists and agnostics—in other words, atheists and agnostics whose non-belief is based in reason, evidence, and reflection rather than in ignorance, passion, folly, vice, and the like. In an interesting recent inversion of this view, Rey (2007) claims that theistic avowal of belief is never based in reason, evidence, and reflection but, rather, is always the product of self-deception. McGrath (2004) argues—counter to the available evidence—that non-belief is on its last legs, owing to the purported demise of allegedly underpinning doctrines: “Freudianism,” “Marxism,” and the like.

Conceptions of God

Throughout the history of theism in the West, there are several different currents of thought that flow continuously, though with differing comparative strength in different eras. These currents of thought are not necessarily mutually exclusive: some conceptions of God have features that belong to more than one current.

One set of ideas is based securely in the thought that God’s transcendence or otherness places very severe limitations on what we can know or sensibly say about the intrinsic nature of God. On some versions of these ideas, there is nothing “positive” that we can know or say about God’s intrinsic nature: we can only know or say what God’s intrinsic nature is not. On many versions of these ideas, while there is almost nothing *literal* that we can know or say about God’s intrinsic nature, there are figures, or metaphors, or allusions that have some value as items of knowledge or assertion. However, on other versions of these ideas, there are not even figures, or metaphors, or allusions that have value as items of knowledge or assertion concerning God’s intrinsic nature.

A second set of ideas is based in the thought that access to God requires some kind of mystical experience or illumination, or, at any rate, some kind of religious experience. Often, these ideas go together with claims about the ineffability and incommunicability of the knowledge that is acquired by way of mystical experience, illumination, and religious experience in general. These ideas are typically taken to contrast with the first set of ideas because, on this second set of ideas, it is supposed that there is knowledge of God’s intrinsic nature, albeit knowledge that is incommunicable, whereas, on the first set of ideas, there is simply no knowledge of God’s intrinsic nature.

A third set of ideas is drawn from the basic thought that God is the fundamental principle, or ground, or source of (more or less) everything else. This kind of idea finds elaboration in pagan philosophy—especially, for example, in Aristotle’s conception of the Prime Mover—and in the more arcane moments of Christian theology, such as in Tillich’s conception of “being itself.” On some versions of these ideas, God is not personal, and not properly regarded as an agent. However, on other versions of these ideas, it is held that these ideas are compatible with further claims about the personality and agency of God.

A fourth set of ideas centers around a positive conception of God that characterized much thought about God during the Middle Ages: God is simple, eternal, unchanging, infinite, indestructible, necessarily existent, and so forth. Some might argue that these properties are not “positive,” however, it is hard to argue with the claim that proponents

of these ideas supposed that God's nature is intrinsically simple, unchanging, eternal, and so forth.

A fifth set of ideas is based around the conception of God as person and agent. While these ideas are often criticized—on grounds of undue “anthropomorphism”—by proponents of some of the earlier sets of ideas, these ideas have the advantage that they seem to comport well with at least some aspects of literal and close-to-literal interpretation of scripture. In modern garb—“open theism”—these ideas involve rejection of some of the attributes that were characteristically ascribed to God's intrinsic nature in the Middle Ages: simplicity, immutability, eternity, and so forth.

Of course, there is typically much more to Christian theism than this brief outline discloses; however, my intention here has been merely to sketch some of the history of philosophical discussion of Christian commitment to theism. The history of philosophical discussion of Christian commitment to such doctrines as Trinity and Incarnation is an entirely different topic, well beyond the compass of this chapter.

Related Topics

Chapter 4: Christianity; Chapter 5: Islam; Chapter 10: Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Intellectual Life; Chapter 11: Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Intellectual Life; Chapter 20: Philosophy of Religion; Chapter 49: History and Experience

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2

ASIAN PHILOSOPHY

Matthew Dasti

Concern with theism and issues related to theistic belief takes on various manifestations throughout Asia. Largely, however, philosophical reflection on theism is an Indian affair. This chapter will therefore focus upon the intersection of theism and philosophy in India. Given the great number of Indian philosophical and religious schools, an exhaustive survey would amount to little more than a list of names and definitions. Accordingly, this study will err on the side of depth over breadth, with the intention of providing familiarity with central issues and debates. The final section will serve as an appendix of sorts, by listing major philosophical schools and their perspectives on theism.

Initially, I must make a few terminological notes: By “theism,” I refer to belief in a God-like creator or foundation of the world, who is often thought to have a providential care for the fate of human beings and who is the object of various kinds of religious adoration. Sanskrit terms within the semantic range of “God” include *īśvara*, “controller,” “Lord”; *brahman*, “ultimate reality”; *bhagavān*, “Blessed one,” “Lord”; *parama-ātman*, “supreme self,” and, in some cases *ātman*, “self” (or “Self”). Indian religions often speak of divinities of a lesser status that might have wide-ranging cognitive ability, exert influence over features of the cosmos and accept sacrificial offerings. I will refer to such beings with the lower case “gods.” Further, I will use the word “Hindu” to refer to those persons and traditions which accept the authority of the Vedas and Upaniṣads—if only nominally—along with allied texts, cultural norms, and practices. “Hindu” is, of course, a problematic term for various reasons, including the fact that it refers to hundreds of philosophical and religious movements under a single heading. Nevertheless, it has gained a certain currency, and nothing more effective has yet surfaced. At times, I will speak of the “Hindu umbrella” to more accurately characterize the traditions in question.

Origins

Philosophical reflection on theism is evident in the foundational texts of various Indian traditions of thought. India’s oldest body of literature, the Vedas (c.1500 BCE for their earliest portions), are collections of sacred hymns and directions for the performance of sacrifice, written in Sanskrit. They are primarily concerned with ritual acts and not theology. They contain, however, speculations about the “All-maker” (Ṛig 10.82) and, famously, a description of the world as flowing from the ritual sacrifice of a God-like being (Ṛig 10.90). The creation hymn of the Ṛig Veda (10.129) provides a cosmogonical myth followed by skeptical considerations about anyone’s ability to know of the world’s origins.

Though the Vedas contain hints of theistic reflection, for the followers of the Vedic culture, robust theistic philosophical reflection begins with the Upaniṣads (c.800–300 BCE for the leading Upaniṣads), a series of mystico-philosophical texts which are appended to different Vedas. Unlike Buddhists and Jains, who emerge from a similar cultural nexus, Upaniṣadic sages do not reject the Vedas and Vedic sacrificial religion. They do, however, sharply criticize the performance of sacrifice for worldly results. Seeking a deeper understanding of sacrifice, they search for hidden connections between ritual acts and higher realities. In the Upaniṣads, acts of sacrifice, the world of human beings, the world of the gods, and the cosmos itself are thus tied together in a rich schema of sacred homology. Most famously, the Upaniṣads explore the connection between ultimate reality (*brahman*) and the individual self (*ātman*). Knowledge of this connection is said to produce ultimate freedom and happiness. (See Brereton 1990 for an excellent article-length introduction to Upaniṣadic thought.)

In general, there are two perspectives on *brahman* developed in the Upaniṣads: a monistic strand, in which abounds both apophatic language and identity statements regarding God and the world, and what we might call a personalist strand, which speaks of an ultimate divine being with volition and with whom individuals can have a personal relationship. The two are illustrated, respectively, in the following passages.

As a mass of salt has no distinctive core and surface; this whole thing is a single mass of flavor—so indeed, my dear, this self has no distinctive core and surface; the whole thing is a single mass of cognition . . . For when there is a duality of some kind, then one can see the other . . . [but] when however, the Whole has become one's very self, then who is there for one to see and by what means? About this self, one can only say "not—, not—."

(*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.5.13–15; translation in Olivelle 1998: 129–31)

This whole world is the perishable and imperishable, the manifest and the unmanifest joined together—and the Lord bears it, while the self (*ātman*), who is not the Lord, remains bound, because he is the enjoyer. When he comes to know God, he is freed from all fetters.

(*Śvetāśvatāra Upaniṣad* 1.8; translation in Olivelle 1998: 415)

For Hindus, the *Bhagavad-gītā* (*Song of the Lord*; c.200 BCE), which recounts the teachings of Śrī Krishna to his friend, the warrior Arjuna, has a respected philosophical and religious status not unlike the Upaniṣads. There we find a more consistent articulation of personalist theism. Krishna, identified with God, thus states:

I am the source of everything. All things flow from me. The wise persons who realize this worship me with great feeling . . . I grant those persons, ever engaged in yoga and worshiping me with love, the insight by which they may come to me.

(*Gītā* 10.8, 10.10; translations are mine unless otherwise noted)

The above texts help set the direction for over a millennium and a half of Hindu reflection upon theism. In contrast, some of the early sermons of the Buddha provide a foundation for later Buddhist philosophical atheism, the most sophisticated in classical

India. Often, Buddha's dismissal of theism is simply part of his pragmatic, anti-speculative approach to philosophy: people often invest in all sorts of religious and philosophical claims, including the theistic hypothesis, which are far removed from their own experience. This leads to distraction from more important ethical and meditational pursuits (*Dīgha-nikāya*, *sūta* 13; see Hayes 1988: 5–8). Elsewhere, he argues that belief in a benevolent creator God undermines personal responsibility and is further contradicted by the fact of widespread innocent suffering (*Majjhima Nikāya* 101; see Jackson 1986: 320). Further, we may note the deep resonance between Buddha's famous denial of an individual self, which preserves the continued identity of a person, and the Buddhist denial of an enduring world Self or God who preserves the universe as a whole (Nanamoli and Bodhi 2009; Walshe 1995).

Theism in the Classical Period

What is commonly thought of as the classical period of Indian philosophy begins soon after the dawn of the Common Era. This period is dominated by competing schools. Generally, philosophical progress and innovation are carried out within such schools through commentaries and sub-commentaries upon foundational texts such as the *Nyāya-sūtra* (*Sūtras on Logic*) or *Yoga-sūtra* (*Sūtras on Yoga*). Schools are differentiated by a handful of factors: core doctrine, foundational texts, and leading teachers. Though they are distinct entities, there is much sharing and mutual influence amongst them. It is noteworthy, for example, that while Mīmāṃsā (the Hindu “Exegete” school) and Buddhism are staunch opponents, the two share various arguments against Nyāya (the Hindu “Logic” school's) natural theology. Nyāya philosophers and Buddhists likewise inspire mutual developments in epistemology and logical theory despite their trenchant opposition in many areas of philosophical doctrine.

I would like to note a few trends in the schools vis-à-vis theism. First, acceptance of the authority of the Vedas does not entail theistic belief. While Hindu philosophy is largely theistic, schools such as Mīmāṃsā and Sāṃkhya deny the existence of a creator God. Second, despite the fact that most Indian schools of philosophy profess religious or soteriological motives, philosophical schools are not always the analogues of religious traditions or sub-traditions. There was never, for example, a “Nyāya religion,” though leading Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika philosophers tended to have connections with Śaivism. Vedānta has a profound influence on Hindu religious culture, although it is not an independent religion either (theistic Vedāntins are often Vaiṣṇava in religious orientation). Likewise, Sāṃkhya philosophy and Yoga pervasively influence Indian religious thought, yet they too are not independent religions. Third, most classical Indian atheists depart from their modern counterparts by rejecting physicalist accounts of consciousness and professing the truth of other-worldly religious doctrines. They usually accept the existence of various gods who are worthy of human homage. Such gods do not, however, stand above creation, being firmly entrenched within it. India's most notorious atheists, the Cārvākas, are physicalists, arguing that consciousness is simply an emergent property of matter, while attacking the motives of religious authorities (Mādhavācārya 2002: 4). Apart from the Cārvākas, however, most classical Indian atheists reject physicalism, defend the post-mortem survival of consciousness, participate in religious rituals, and aim for some salvific state.

Rational Theology

Rational arguments for God's existence have largely been the province of the Nyāya school. As prominent members of the Hindu umbrella, Naiyāyikas (Nyāya philosophers) accept the sacred status of religious literature such as the Vedas, the Upaniṣads, and the *Bhagavad-gītā*. Unlike the scripturally based Vedāntic theists, however, they contend that a core, baseline theism can be established by argument alone. *Nyāya-sūtras* 4.1.19–21 discuss the relation between human freedom, karma, and the sovereignty of God. Although their import is contested by modern scholars, Nyāya's explicit endorsement of theism stems from the earliest known commentators on these *sūtras*; ensuing generations of commentators would affix their arguments for the existence of "the Lord" (*īśvara*) to this section of the text.

Naiyāyikas offer a number of arguments for God's existence, including a defense of religious experience as evidentially authoritative, but Nyāya's most cherished argument was framed by Uddyotakara (c.600 CE), who contends that the world requires an intelligent creator. Below is his version of the argument followed by those of later Naiyāyikas: Jayanta (c.875 CE) and Udayana (c.975 CE).

Primordial matter, atoms and *karma* function when guided by a conscious agent because they are insentient (*acetanātvāt*) like an axe. As axes, due to insentience, operate only when directed by a sentient agent, so too do things like primordial nature, atoms and *karma*. Therefore, they too are directed by a cause possessed of intelligence.

(*Nyāya-vārttika* 4.1.21; henceforth NV)

Things like the earth require a maker who is conscious of things like the purpose and form of the product, since they are effects (*kāryatvāt*), like a pot.

(Jayanta 1969: 492)

Things like the earth have a maker as their cause, because they are products (*kāryatvāt*).

(Udayana 1996: 369)

These passages contain different formulations of what we will call the "argument from producthood" (*kāryatva*) (see Chakrabarti 1989 for more formulations of the argument). They are summary statements and are, in each instance, accompanied by extensive elaboration and defense. In classical Indian logic, inference is said to depend on an invariable correlation between things or properties, such that one thing may be a reliable sign or "prover" of something else. For example, the invariable correlation between smoke and fire allows smoke to be a prover of fire. If we see smoke in the distance, we may therefore justifiably infer the presence of fire. In the arguments for a cosmic maker, Nyāya consistently appeals to an invariable correlation between something's being a *product*—at minimum being a composite whole, whose parts are insentient and incapable of independent movement—and having an intelligent maker (see Dasti 2011 for further consideration of the nature of products in Nyāya). Through induction we apprehend an invariable correlation between products and intelligent makers. We then infer such makers in the presence of similar products. Technically, we infer that something

has the property *having an intelligent cause* when it is qualified by the property *producthood*. *Producthood* becomes the indicator or prover of an intelligent cause. Since things such as the earth, human bodies and trees are held to be products, they require an intelligent maker.

We may note that God is not mentioned within the initial formulations of the argument above. The first stage of the argument merely purports to establish a maker-in-general for the products in question. Of course, Nyāya further contends that only a God-like being fits the bill. The maker's vast cognitive power is suggested according to the requirements for it to create the manifest world. By induction it is argued that makers must have direct awareness of the material causes of their creations. The material causes of the world are the atoms stretching throughout space, the individual selves or souls, and the karmic merit that determines the circumstances individual selves will face. These things are supersensible in a very strong sense—not merely too small to be seen by the naked eye, but categorically beyond the range of ordinary perception, even if such perception is augmented through optical enhancements of various sorts. Therefore, the maker must possess something like an all-embracing cognitive power.

Naiyāyikas want to establish more than simple omniscience for the maker. His knowledge is held to be both timeless and immediate. Uddyotakara underscores the directness of God's cognition by stating that it is *pratyakṣa*, perceptual (NV 4.1.21). Vācaspati (c.925 CE) argues that God's awareness is a single cognitive act which ranges over the entire creation and, further, that since God has no body and no *manas* (a psychological organ which governs sense functioning, memory, and selective attention), his cognition is not produced within time, but is intrinsic to his nature (*Nyāya-vārttika-tātparyā-ṭīkā* 4.1.21; henceforth NVT). God's being unembodied is argued for on a number of grounds, but primarily because he is the initial combiner of the atoms in the beginning of creation, and must therefore have no body of his own, on pain of an infinite regress of creators. Udayana supports this by arguing that mental causation is a counterexample to the contention that all agency is bodily; he further suggests that mental causation is a model of God's influence on the cosmos (Udayana 1995: 390ff.). A similar argument is used to establish God's exhaustive power. Only a being with vast power could control the supersensible atoms at all times and places without use of a body. His power, unmediated by a body, is also part of his very nature.

I would suggest that Nyāya's argument from *producthood* is best understood as an analogue of the argument from design. It is true that Nyāya does not devote much attention to an analysis of teleology. Nevertheless, the above arguments focus on aspects of the world, whose coherent structure, coupled with their materials' being insentient and incapable of independent action, is supposed to trigger recognition of agential causation. Chakrabarti notes that the main issue at stake is the complexity of the physical universe, not its mere existence (Chakrabarti 1989: 22). Quite telling is a refrain found in Uddyotakara's consideration of alternative proposals for the efficient cause of the creation: "that is not acceptable, owing to insentience." This implies that the crucial issue in his proof is the need for conscious, volitional agency to account for the complexity of the manifest world. Furthermore, the *producthood* argument faces objections (seen immediately below) which, in Western philosophy, are traditionally directed toward design inferences: charges of inductive or analogical overextension. The similarity between the objections of Nyāya's opponents and Western opponents of the design argument (most notably Hume) is not due to mere historical accident, but to deep similarity of dialectical structure.

Early Buddhist philosophers offer a variety of anti-theistic arguments, including versions of the argument from evil and charges that an immutable creator God could not interact with a variegated, changing world. But starting with the great Buddhist philosopher Dharmakīrti (c.600 CE), opponents of Nyāya's rational theology focus on epistemological questions, particularly the epistemology of inferential cognition, and they employ the sophisticated logical machinery developed by Buddhist and Nyāya thinkers to attack the cogency of the argument from *producthood*. An important line of argument contends that Nyāya's proof contains an illicit breach of inductive boundaries. Since the correlation between products and intelligent makers is grounded in our experience of ordinary, common artifacts and ordinary, common makers, no such correlation can be cited to support inference of a wholly unique, God-like creator of the manifest world. Dharmakīrti (1968) argues that one can legitimately infer the property *has a God-like maker* only if the products in question (the earth, human bodies, etc.) were qualified by the prover property *product of a God-like being*. From something like *producthood* simpliciter, one could only establish a probandum within the class of makers previously experienced, the reference class by which the correlation of *producthood* and *having an intelligent maker* is itself discovered. The inferential sign *product of a God-like being* is, however, unavailable to the Naiyāyikas, as they are unable to cite a commonly accepted instance of such a property (*Pramāṇa-vārttika*, *pramāṇa-siddhi* 12–18).

Other arguments advance a related claim that Nyāya ignores properties which its cosmic maker should share with other makers. Commonly, it is argued that Nyāya's maker must have a body—an untoward consequence—since the class of makers which we have experienced, from which we become aware of the invariable correlation between *producthood* and *having an intelligent maker*, is entirely populated by embodied beings. This objection is pressed by the leading Mīmāṃsā philosophers Kumārila (c.650 CE) and Prabhākara (c.675 CE). Kumārila argues that insofar as he is a maker, God requires a body, since, by induction, all makers have bodies. But as bodies are products, another maker would be required to create God's body (which initiates an infinite regress). Should Nyāya contend that God can create his own body (or that he requires no body), Kumārila responds that unembodied beings would have no capacity to create, again, by induction on the class of makers (see Jha 1964: 41; Kumārila 1983: 361; Bilimoria 1990: 485–9). Aside from these, Buddhists and Mīmāṃsakas proffer arguments to directly refute the theistic hypothesis, including arguments from evil and typically Buddhist arguments that the notion of an eternal, unchanging being who creates and cognizes the world is incoherent.

Nyāya's response to the problems of inductive boundaries is to argue that when applying inductive generalizations to specific cases, we rightly employ inference to the best explanation. This allows enough freedom to discover new information. To defend this principle, Vācaspati asks, "how is it that we come to infer the existence of sense-faculties which act as instruments of cognition?" He then tells the following story: Our experience of various actions, like the cutting of blades allows us to recognize a concomitance between *being an action* and *requiring a causal instrument*. In the case of cutting, the causal instrument required is something like an axe or knife. Later, reflecting on the phenomenon of perception, we recognize that it too is a kind of act. Thus, like the cutting of wood, it requires an instrument. But in the case of perception, we require an instrument capable of generating the given result, phenomenal awareness, and material tools such as axes or knives will not serve such a purpose. Therefore, we take the notion *instrument in general* and unpack it according to the case at hand in order to infer a visual faculty

which is quite unlike axes and other known instruments. Similarly, he argues, having first established that the earth, human bodies, and the like have a maker-in-general, we can unpack the nature of the maker in order to account for the data given in this particular case. One may thus infer a cosmic maker without violating well-established norms of reasoning (NVT 4.1.21).

In response to Buddhist arguments that God could not both create and cognize a changing universe while maintaining his diachronic singularity, Nyāya appeals to the position argued above, that God's creative act and creative cognition are both single events which span the entire creation.

In response to the problem of evil, Nyāya appeals to the functioning of karma, which is accepted by most of Nyāya's anti-theist opponents: current sufferings can be attributed to the karmic reactions to prior misdeeds by the suffering individuals. God is, to be sure, the overseer of the functioning of the mechanism of karma, and is, therefore, instrumental in human suffering. (Some Naiyāyikas, indeed, offer a design argument which focuses on the functioning of karma; see Jayanta 2005: 175). But as karmic punishment is meant to rectify individuals, Naiyāyikas like Udayana (1995: 407ff.) argue that this is akin to the suffering caused by parents or teachers while punishing a child, or by physicians while treating patients. As such pain is meant for the betterment of the suffering individual, it can be attributed to the compassion of the pain-giver. Moreover, many Naiyāyikas hold that God does not have the ability to undermine the karmic system, but only to carry it out (a limitation of God's power not accepted by other Indian theists, particularly those in the *bhakti* traditions). These Naiyāyikas are, in effect, willing to sacrifice some of God's power in order to insulate his moral goodness from criticism. Finally, Nyāya argues that God's compassion is further manifest in the fact that he works for the enlightenment of individual persons by disseminating scripture and other sources of *dharma* and yogic practice which, when appropriately followed, result in salvation. The creation is seen, in this sense, as a chance for unenlightened beings to work through their karmic inheritance and ignorance in order to achieve the supreme personal good.

Revealed Theology

India is home to a vast number of traditions of philosophical theism grounded in sacred texts such as the Upaniṣads, *Bhagavad-gītā*, *Purāṇas*, *Āgamas*, *Tantras*, and *Pañcarātras*. In this section, I will focus on India's leading tradition of philosophical theology, Vedānta. The central Vedāntic task is to provide a compelling *brahman*-centered metaphysics grounded in the major Upaniṣadic texts. We will consider the work of the influential Vedāntins Śaṅkara (c.788–820 CE) and Rāmānuja (c.1017–1137 CE). As noted in the section on "Origins" above, in Upaniṣadic literature two primary notions of God come to the fore, as both the non-personal ground of being and as the personal divinity which creates and sustains the world. Śaṅkara, in his *Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya* and his commentaries on the *Gītā* and primary Upaniṣads, has articulated the most influential elaboration of the former. His school is known as Vedantic Non-dualism (*advaita-vedānta*). Rāmānuja, in his *Śrī-bhāṣya* commentary on the *Brahma-sūtra* and his independent treatise *Veda-artha-saṃgraha*, has offered a paradigmatic defense of the theistic interpretation of Vedānta, along with a wide-ranging attack on Śaṅkara's monism. His school is known as Vedantic Qualified Non-dualism (*viśiṣṭādvaita-vedānta*). We will now consider their respective positions on four issues:

- (i) God's essential nature;
- (ii) the manner in which God is the cause of the manifest world;
- (iii) God's relationship to individual persons; and
- (iv) God as supremely valuable.

For Śaṅkara, the explanations are as follows:

(i) God is a unified, undifferentiated self-aware consciousness, which encompasses all of reality, as traced to texts like the following: “[*brahman*] is one only, without a second” (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.2.1). Scriptural statements which describe *brahman* as a personal creator God are held to be true from an unenlightened perspective. They are, however, ultimately false, since duality of any kind, including that which exists between a creator and his creation, is illusory. From the highest perspective, there is nothing but non-dual *brahman*, a single, conscious substance, as is learnt through scripture and confirmed in yogic experience. But until one achieves this insight, the world is conceived of in a realist way as created by God (*brahman*) in a volitional act of emanation. Upon enlightenment, the falsity of this view of the world is exposed, as is the falsity of the view that there is a creator God who stands in relation to the world (*Brahma-sūtra-bhāṣya* 2.1.14; henceforth BSB). In light of this we may, therefore, speak of an unqualified “higher *brahman*” and “lower *brahman*” (that is, “*brahman* with attributes”).

Śaṅkara's theism is, in the end, sublated by a complete, uncompromising monism. He thus harmonizes the two Upaniṣadic approaches to God by claiming that only one is true from the highest perspective. (For the rest of this section, unless noted otherwise, we will speak of God as *brahman* in the higher sense.)

(ii) From an unenlightened perspective, we may speak of God creating the world through a volitional act of emanation. To this end, Śaṅkara endorses the causal account of the Sāṃkhya tradition, *sat-kārya-vāda*, the doctrine that an effect is contained within its (material) cause (BSB 2.1.14). From the enlightened perspective, however, there is no creation, no world, and no personal God. Here, Śaṅkara's account of causation is more specifically a “doctrine of illusion,” *vivarta-vāda*, which has superficial resemblance to *sat-kārya-vāda* in that both prioritize the material cause over its effects. The Sāṃkhya doctrine, however, recognizes the reality of effects, while the doctrine of illusion holds that effects are merely false superimpositions upon the cause—there is nothing but the material cause. In support of this view, Śaṅkara cites a famous passage from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (6.1.4) which claims that the various forms that a substance such as clay can take are simply verbal handles, lacking in genuine reality. Only the clay itself is genuinely real.

The higher *brahman* is, in a peculiar way, the material cause of the manifest world, insofar as it is the world's cognitive substratum. The fallacious world of common experience, consisting of various entities existing in dualistic apposition and bounded by name and form is superimposed upon *brahman*, just as the illusion of a snake could be imposed on a coil of rope (see the introduction to the BSB). Śaṅkara supports this with a variety of arguments meant to show that effects are nothing more than their causes and that a pluralist metaphysics is incoherent. For the latter purpose, he anticipates Bradley's famous regress argument: should substances have modes or properties, the substances would have to be connected with their properties with some kind of ontic “glue” (the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika term for such glue is *samavāya*, “inherence”). But such

glue would itself need to be related to both the substance and property, requiring two more instances, glue₂ and glue₃, which would then need to be connected to the original glue by means of glue₄ and glue₅, ad infinitum (BSB 2.1.18). The upshot of this, and allied arguments, is to eliminate “property” as a metaphysical category, along with other categories, until only a single unqualified substance remains. The only substance that is completely irreducible is pure consciousness itself—equated with *brahman*—since any experience of reduction or sublation presupposes consciousness (*Gītā-bhāṣya* 2.16) (translation in Warrier n.d.).

Śaṅkara’s view is, in its fullest form, a denial of real causation altogether. As a non-dual reality which excludes differentiation of any kind, God does not enter into causal relations with anything. The Upaniṣadic contention that “God is everything” (*sarva khalv idam brahma*) is thus taken to mean that God is the *only* thing. The world of ordinary experience is simply the product of a primordial ignorance which obscures the reality of *brahman* and engenders our experience of a world of differentiation. Upon the dawning of genuine spiritual knowledge, all differentiation is sublated by the singular reality of *brahman*.

(iii) God is related to individual persons by the relationship of strict identity. “I am forever the highest *Brahman*, released, as it were, unborn, one alone, and without duality” (Mayeda 1992: 120).

(iv) God is supremely valuable both negatively and positively. Negatively, realization of our essential identity with *brahman* frees us from the cycle of rebirth and its concomitant suffering. Positively, the experience of identity with *brahman* is blissful. We must remember that such blissfulness is not a content of consciousness, as such would involve differentiation and duality. Rather it is the very nature of *brahman* consciousness itself, owing to its being completely unobstructed.

In opposition to the absolute monism of Śaṅkara, theism is the foundation of Rāmānuja’s metaphysics, as he leads the theistic Vedāntin response to Śaṅkara and his followers. Before embarking upon his own explanation of the *Brahma-sūtras*, the *Śrī-bhāṣya* (henceforth SB), Rāmānuja provides an exhaustive refutation of Śaṅkara’s non-dualism. Among other things, Rāmānuja attacks the notion of primordial ignorance, which Non-dualists cite as the reason for our illusion of a pluralist universe. Rāmānuja asks: “What is the locus of such ignorance?” We cannot say it exists within individual selves, since the sense of individuality is itself produced by ignorance and is therefore preceded by it. Neither can we say that it exists within *brahman*, as *brahman* is essentially incapable of ignorance (*The Vedānta-Sūtras with the Commentary of Rāmānuja* 1.1.1). There are no other options. He further argues that if such spiritual ignorance is real, then it is, in fact, a second thing besides *brahman*, which would undermine Śaṅkara’s monism. But if it is false, how could it have real causal influence in effecting our shared experience of the world of heterogeneity?

Regarding the four issues introduced above, his answers are as follows:

(i) “The word *brahman* denotes the Highest Person, who is essentially free from all imperfections and possesses numberless classes of auspicious qualities of unsurpassable excellence” (ibid.: 6f.).

(ii) God is both the efficient and material cause of the world, as illustrated by the Upaniṣadic text “Let me become many; let me propagate myself” (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.2.3). Unlike Nyāya, which contends that God creates the universe out of eternally existing atoms, Rāmānuja takes the stuff of creation to be an aspect of God himself. Given God’s intimacy with the creation, Rāmānuja is very concerned to preserve his autonomy and freedom from worldly defects. To this end, Rāmānuja provides a model which is central to his theology: God is the self of the world (see Lott 1976). A self is a “supporter, regulator, and purpose-giving end” of a body. Citing passages such as *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3.7.15 and *Bhagavad-gītā* 18.61, Rāmānuja argues that God stands in such a relation to both the insentient world and to individual souls themselves, that they both could be said, in a technical sense, to constitute his body. The world, and the souls within it, are one with God in the sense that a soul/body complex is an organic unity. This account provides rationale for Upaniṣadic statements which extol the oneness of creation and all-pervasiveness of *brahman*, and which speak of *brahman* as the indwelling self of all, while providing enough distance between God *proper* and the creation that its vicissitudes do not mar his essential perfection. Given its blending of duality and monism, Rāmānuja’s view comes to be known as *Viśiṣṭa-advaita*, “the non-duality of *Brahman* with qualities.”

(iii) The individual selves which populate the world are grounded in God, who sustains their existence. Still, their individuality is eternal. As God’s *body*, they are governed and supported by him, but are granted enough freedom to make morally significant decisions.

(iv) God is supremely valuable in that ultimate felicity is produced when an individual turns completely toward him, in a state of constant loving devotional meditation (*bhakti*), in conjunction with the performance of moral and ritual duties. Such is the gateway to liberation and immortality, conceived of as an eternal, beatific relationship of love with *brahman*.

Theism in the Schools

I conclude this chapter with a description of major philosophical schools in relation to their stance on the question of God. Schools will be grouped in one of two headings: theists, or *īśvara-vādins* (those who profess the existence of God) and atheists, *anīśvara-vādins* (those who profess the non-existence of God). Schools noted with a parenthetical “H” are Hindu schools.

Theists (*īśvara-vādins*)

- Vedānta (H): As noted above, Vedānta comprises an enormously influential family of schools devoted to systematically interpreting the Upaniṣads, *Bhagavad-gītā* and other “Vedāntic” literature, while developing a consistent, compelling metaphysics centered on *brahman*, “that from which everything emanates” (*Brahma-sūtra* 1.1.2). Philosophical debates amongst Vedāntins center on the nature of *brahman*, its relationship with the world, and the best practices by which *brahman* can be realized. The three leading schools are Śaṅkara’s Advaita (non-dualism), Rāmānuja’s Viśiṣṭa-advaita (qualified non-dualism), and Madhva’s (c.1238–1317) Dvaita (dualism).

In each case, the school's name is taken by its founder's position on the nature of the relationship between God and the world. As Śāṅkara's Vedānta is ultimately a strict monism, Rāmānuja and Madhva's schools are often contrastingly described as "theistic Vedānta."

In recent times, neo-Vedāntic monism modeled on Śāṅkara's Advaita-vedānta has been a leading Indian contribution to global religious thought. Swami Vivekānānda (1863–1902) influentially argued to Western audiences that such monism provides the basis for genuine religious pluralism, while framing an (not entirely accurate) image of mystical and intuitive Indian thought as a counterbalance to Western rationalism (see Ganeri 2001). As promulgated by Vivekānānda and other neo-Vedāntins such as the great scholar and statesman Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975), Śāṅkarite neo-Vedānta became the most well-known form of Hindu thought amongst Westerners in the twentieth century.

- Yoga (H): Most Indian schools advocate some kinds of yoga practice, the well-known physical and contemplative disciplines meant to engender health, insight, and ultimately, enlightenment. The Yoga school (with a capital "Y"), centered on *Patañjali's Yoga-sūtra* (c.200 CE), is famous for providing a theoretical framework for such practices. While the *Yoga-sūtra* tends to focus on spiritual exercises of a self-help nature, it is an expressly theistic text; a number of *sūtras* provide a description of God (*Yoga-sūtra* 1.24–7; see Bryant 2009: 81–109 for an excellent commentary), while advocating "devotion to God" (*īśvara-praṇidhāna*) as both a meditative practice and an element of moral discipline (*Yoga-sūtra* 1.23; 2.1; 2.32). Various commentators suggest ways in which devotional surrender can be integrated into yogic practice. The most influential commentator, Vyāsa (c.400 CE), intimates that such devotion is the most effective means by which meditative perfection can be attained. In passing, we may note that traditional commentaries on *Yoga-sūtra* 1.27 chart an interesting connection between theism and the philosophy of language: the sacred phoneme OM does not denote God through mere convention but rather is a form of God manifest through sound, whose denotative power is inherent and non-conventional.
- Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika (H): Amongst Hindu schools, Nyāya pioneers the development of logical theory and an epistemology centered on knowledge sources (*pramāṇas*). It defends the reality of universals, substances, and individual selves (including God), largely in debate with Buddhist anti-realists. Nyāya is dedicated to the philosophical defense of Hindu religious culture and the metaphysics which supports it (Jayanta 1969: 7) and, as seen above, constitutes India's leading tradition of rational theology.

Vaiśeṣika ("Particularism") is a sister school to Nyāya, focused upon development of a realist metaphysics and an atomistic cosmology. The Vaiśeṣika thinker Praśastapāda (c.550 CE) appeals to God in explaining the coming together and dissolution of atomic substances during cosmic creation and annihilation, and as the force behind the moral law which ties actions to consequences (*Padārtha-dhārma-saṃgraha* 40). Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika become unified in the lifetime of the great Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika philosopher Udayana (c.975 CE).

- Kashmiri Śaivism (H): Indian tantra is a wide-ranging cultural, religious, and philosophical movement, indelibly stamping Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina thought. While respecting the authority of the Vedas and allied literature, Hindu tantrics tend to consider them superficial, preferring esoteric texts and revelations which post-date

the Vedas and are taken to express more fundamental, secret truths (for example, *Tantras*, *Āgamas*, *Pañcarātras*). Tantric texts center on mystical cosmologies, rituals, and yogic practices, which allow an adept to “ritually appropriate and channel” the divine energy (*śakti*) which is the substratum of the world (White 2000: 9). On the whole, tantra is much more of a world-affirming tradition than classical Yoga (and, for that matter, Advaita-vedānta), employing ritual and yogic practice for world-transformation as opposed to world-escape.

Kashmiri Śaivism, particularly as developed by the great Abhinava-gūpta (c.950–1025 CE), is a fit representative of the theistic strand of tantra, providing an alternative to the theological orientations of the leading schools of Vedānta. Like Non-dualism, Kashmiri Śaivism affirms that we are entirely one with God: nothing less than Śiva himself. But like Qualified Non-dualism, and unlike Advaita-vedānta, Kashmiri Śaivism rejects conceptions of the absolute as static, unqualified being, which deny the reality of the variegated world. Abhinava’s God is active, spontaneous, and capable of reflective cognition, maintaining a unity with the world that does not undercut its reality (see Dyczkowski 1987: 32–57).

Atheists (anīśvara-vādins)

- Cārvāka: Characterized as the libertines of classical India, this school champions a thoroughgoing materialism, hedonism, and fairly robust skepticism, while openly mocking religious belief. The Cārvākas argue that religious authorities (particularly Brahmin priests) use religion to dupe gullible people, in order to maintain their livelihood as ritual experts. The Cārvāka repudiation of theism (and religion more generally) is captured in the following statement: “‘Hell’ is simply the suffering born of ordinary pains. The ‘Supreme Lord’ is simply the King, who is known to everyone. ‘Final release’ is simply the destruction of the body” (Mādhavācārya 2002: 4 and 7–8).
- Mīmāṃsā (H): The most conservative of Hindu schools, Mīmāṃsā is devoted to preserving the ancient ritual religion of the Vedas. It argues that the world is eternal, as are the Vedas, the latter being passed from teacher to student in a chain stretching back through infinite time. The associated system of rewards and punishments undergirding Vedic sacrificial religion is likewise beginningless. There is thus no theoretical need for a creator God who upholds the world or the moral law. While accepting the Upaniṣads as legitimate, Mīmāṃsakas deflate their importance, claiming that they mainly serve to defend the notion of a self which survives death, in order to support Vedic religion (which generates benefits that accrue after death). In fact, much of Mīmāṃsā’s anti-theistic argumentation is motivated by a desire to preserve the epistemological purity of the Vedas by making their authority independent of everything, even a God-like being. Such arguments are combined with straightforwardly atheistic dialectics meant to illustrate the untenability of a creator God (see Bilimoria 1990).
- Buddhism: Buddhism might be the most influential Indian contributor to world thought, given its remarkable influence throughout South and East Asia. As noted above, Buddhism tends to consider theistic belief either irrelevant or detrimental to spiritual practice. Early Buddhism was a religion of self-help; Buddha was a teacher whose life set an example and Buddha-hood was a viable aspiration for practitioners. Though various schools of the later Mahāyāna tend to allow for more divinized

notions of Buddha as well as godlike Boddhisattvas who function as givers of benedictions and objects of adoration, Buddhist thought consistently rejects the notion of a creator God who sustains the world and the moral order.

Various Buddhist schools argue in opposition to Hindu philosophical theism, especially Nyāya's rational theology (as seen above). The Yogācāra idealist school was the most consistent and sophisticated of the anti-theists. Led by Dharmakīrti, they apply rigorously developed analytical tools in order to undermine Nyāya's proof (see Vattanky 1984: 33, 39; Kajiyama 1998: 95n, 255; and Chemparathy 1972: 78 for discussion of Dharmakīrti's influence on Buddhist philosophical atheism). Vasubandhu (c.350 CE) focuses on antinomies involved with an eternal, unchanging creator and a varied created world: it is impossible that such a creator could create and cognize such a world while retaining his singular diachronic identity (see Jackson 1986: 321; Hayes 1988: 11–15). Buddhist anti-theism would reach its apex in the work of India's last great Yogācāra Buddhist philosopher, Ratnakīrti (c.1000 CE). In *Faults in the Proof for God* (*Īśvara-sādhana-dūṣaṇa*), he weaves together an attack on Nyāya's proof for God, its normative epistemology of inference, and, implicitly, its semantic realism (see Patil 2009 for a masterful study of this text).

- Sāṃkhya (H): The various schools and sub-schools of Sāṃkhya (lit. “Enumeration”) analyze reality into a small number of fundamental constituents (*tattvas*), while debating over the number and nature of such constituents. While clearly a kind of proto-science, this discipline of analysis was also considered a counterpart and aid to the soteriological quest of yogis; one philosophically identifies the constituents of the world in order to consciously dis-identify with them in meditative practice. Like yoga, Sāṃkhya traditions were widely dispersed throughout classical India. What came to be considered the official school, associated with the *Sāṃkhya-kārikā* of Īśvarakṛṣṇa (c.400 CE), is atheistic. The *Kārikās* hold that insentient primal matter (*prakṛti*) is the only cause of the universe and all effects within it, leaving no theoretical need for God (*Sāṃkhya-kārikā* 22, 56–7). We may note, however, that a great many of the proto-sāṃkhya traditions mentioned in the epic *Mahābhārata* and the *Purāṇas* (historico-religious narratives) are expressly theistic, recognizing God (*īśvara*) as one of the constituents of reality (see Larson 1979: 124–5; Bryant 2009: 92–3).
- Jainism: Like Buddhism, the Jain tradition rejects the authority of the Vedas and Vedic sacrificial religion, while advocating contemplative disciplines and self-abnegation. Jain yoga is largely based on self-reliance, and those who have overcome karmic bondage and ignorance are said to be “conquerors” (*jina*, from which *Jain* is derived). Jains provide some of the leading Indian expositions on non-violent ethics, while developing a perspectivist epistemology and logic. In Jain metaphysics, there is no creator God, as the universe and the moral order are eternal. The *Mahāpurāṇa* (c.9th century CE) famously derides theism as philosophically confused, and the philosopher Guṇaratna (c.15th century) provides one of the last great arguments against Nyāya's natural theology.

Related Topics

Chapter 6: Hindu Theism; Chapter 13: Evidence; Chapter 18: Physical Cosmology; Chapter 20: Philosophy of Religion

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THE GOD OF THE JEWS AND THE JEWISH GOD

Jerome Gellman

The second entry for “Theism” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is this: “A morbid condition characterized by headache, sleeplessness, and palpitation of the heart.” The dictionary goes on to add: “caused by excessive tea-drinking.”

Although Jews might have been drinking tea excessively since the 1600s, as a people they have suffered much longer in their history from loyalty to God and the Torah. Thus, Jewish theism cannot be attributed to tea-drinking. Rather, we should ascribe Jewish theism to a long and convoluted relationship between God and a people who experience themselves as God’s “Chosen People.” This relationship revolves around a divine duality, which I will represent by inventing two ways of referring to God: “God_E” and “God_Y.” “God_E” has its root in the Hebrew Bible’s referring to God as: “Elohim.” “God_Y” begins with biblical YHVH. In time, each of “Elohim” and “YHVH” gave rise to a cluster of features, associated concepts, images, and amplifications, which bear a family resemblance, respectively, to Elohim and YHVH of the Hebrew Bible. My “God_E” and “God_Y” will refer to God as characterized by these two clusters (including at a time when the distinction can no longer be tracked by the terms “Elohim” and “YHVH”).

Elohim and YHVH

The story of Judaic theism is the story of the two central ways in which the Jews have experienced God, growing out of two ways of referring to God in Jewish tradition: “Elohim” and “YHVH.” Around the history of these two ways of experiencing God revolves the history of major landmarks in the Jewish conception of God, starting from the Hebrew Bible to the rabbinic literature of Talmudic times, to Medieval Jewish philosophy, to the mystical Kabbalah, on to Spinoza, Hasidism, modern Jewish philosophy, neo-mysticism, and finally to post-Holocaust times. In what follows I present this complex duality of God in Judaism from a fairly traditional Jewish point of view. (I leave for others non-traditional ways of understanding the duality of YHVH and Elohim, and of understanding God.)

The Hebrew Bible

Elohim

“Elohim” is a plural term, from “Eloha,” meaning “god.” The semantic import of “Eloha” takes us to the idea of power and the wielding of power. In the Ten Commandments, “Elohim” occurs referring not to God but to the “other gods” which the Israelites must not put “before” God. The gods are “Elohim” because they bear power and influence. The purpose of calling God by the plural, “Elohim,” is to stress the supreme degree of power and control God possesses. Ultimately, *all* powers are God’s. In the Jewish view, the plural term when referring to God does not imply a plurality *within* God.

While in many cases “Elohim,” when referring to God, and “YHVH” seem interchangeable in the Hebrew Bible, there is a tendency for “Elohim,” rather than “YHVH,” to occur when referring to God in cosmic or universal contexts, not confined to an Israelite context. Thus it is Elohim who creates the world in Genesis 1, and Elohim is the God of nature. And it is to Elohim that Jethro, the non-Israelite, offers his sacrifices when meeting Moses. (This contradicts some Bible scholars who believe that Jethro worshipped YHVH before meeting Moses. However, as Buber well argues (Buber 1958: 94–100), at least the biblical account of their meeting makes better sense, as I have written.) “Elohim” occurs often in the biblical Wisdom Literature, a literature belonging to a genre with a broad history in the ancient Near East. Rarely does “Elohim” appear in legal parts of the Torah or in the prophetic literature, both aimed at the local, covenantal relationship of God to the Israelite nation.

“Elohim” is not a proper name when used of God. But neither is it a mere description. Rather, it functions as a “title,” for the role that God occupies as the supreme power. Elohim functions like “President” functions in the United States government (Pike 1970: 28–36). It gives a title to the person to whom it refers while not naming that person. Just so, to call God “Elohim” is to refer to God by an honorary title, a title possessed by the Supreme Being.

YHVH

The term YHVH belongs to an entirely different category. It is a (indeed, *the*) proper name of God. In Exodus 3:13, at the burning bush, Moses asks God for his name. God gives “YHVH” as God’s name. For Jewish tradition, “YHVH” would be a rigid designator tracing its referential history back to the encounter by Moses with God at the burning bush, piggybacking from there onto the referential chain of “Elohim.”

Therefore, it makes perfect sense to say, as does Psalms 100:3: “Know that God is God,” when what was said was: “Know that YHVH is Elohim,” meaning that the being whose *name* is “YHVH” possesses the *title* “Elohim.” Just so, supposing a person named “President” became President of the United States, it would be informative to say: “President-^{person} is President-^{office}.” The *Septuagint* translated “YHVH” as “*kyrios*,” “Lord.” The basis of this translation was that since in Judaism “YHVH” was not to be pronounced as written, it was read as “*adonai*,” which means “My Lord.” The King James Bible continued this, translating “Elohim” as “God” and “YHVH” as “the Lord.” It would be closer to the truth, though, to translate “YHVH” as “God,” as a name, and “Elohim” as a title, “the Lord.”

At the burning bush (Exodus 3:14) God explains the name “YHVH” with the words, “*eheyeh ashv eheyeh*” and “*eheyeh*.” Traditionally, these words have a *dynamic* meaning,

which is best translated as “I will be what I will be” and “I will be,” rather than a *static* meaning of “I am what I am” and “I am” (see Parke-Taylor 1975). At the burning bush, YHVH does not introduce himself as the creator of the world, but as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as protector and lover of their descendants.

The import of the name “YHVH” is well put by Jewish Bible scholar, Umberto Cassuto, who writes:

It is I who am with my creatures in their hour of trouble and need . . . to help them and save them. And . . . always and just as I am with you, so am I with all the children of Israel who are enslaved, and with everyone who is in need of My help, both now and in the future.

(Cassuto 1967: 38)

YHVH is more human-like than Elohim, close and intimate. YHVH makes himself manifest. The appearances of YHVH tend to be localized and tangible, whereas Elohim tends to remain invisible and everywhere (Kugel 2007: 107). It is only “YHVH-Elohim” who walks in the garden of Genesis 2, while just “Elohim” of Genesis 1 remains a majestic power throughout the cosmos. Eve declares that YHVH helped her in having a son, Cain (Genesis 4:1). It is YHVH who calls to Abraham to journey to Canaan. And typically it is YHVH, not Elohim, who speaks to Moses and the prophets. It is YHVH who declares in Exodus 19:4 that He carried the Israelite nation on eagles’ wings. YHVH, at Exodus 25:8, tells the Israelites to build a tabernacle so that YHVH may dwell among them. The Israelites are said to be the children of YHVH (Deuteronomy 14:10), not of Elohim. And it is YHVH who in Psalms 91:15, promises that God will participate in the very suffering of the Israelite nation. It is YHVH that the children of Israel are commanded to love with all their heart (Deuteronomy 6:5). All of Jewish prayer is directed to YHVH.

On the other side, YHVH can be mysterious, hidden, inscrutable. The same “I will be” who promises faithfulness fails to say just *what* YHVH will be, covering God with a cloud of unknowing. It is YHVH who shows only His back to Moses and not His face, for no one can see YHVH’s face and live (Exodus 33:23). YHVH can be “a devouring fire.” Since “YHVH” is the very name of God, it not only connotes familiarity but aims at God’s very essence. And so, God’s name can be pronounced only on very holy, solemn occasions. The rabbis taught that the name of God cannot be read as it is written, but was to be read as “*adonai*,” “my Lord.” (Notice the paradox here of holding YHVH afar by refusing to utter the name, yet replacing the name with “my Lord.”) Jewish blessings begin by addressing YHVH as “thou,” quickly changing to third person, as though overcome with a sense of brazenness at having spoken directly to the presence that is also hidden.

So the God of the Jewish Bible has a duality—Elohim and YHVH. In general (with clear exceptions), Elohim is the God of the cosmos, the God who rules all. YHVH, is close, present to the Israelites, promising and bringing redemption, but also mysterious in nature. Yet, Elohim and YHVH are the very same, one and only God. The difference between Elohim and YHVH is not exactly that between transcendence and immanence. Both are living realities, at once both transcendent and immanent. At times YHVH must *descend* from on high (see, for example, Genesis 11:5 and Numbers 11:25), and it is with Elohim that Noah *walks*, right here on earth (Genesis 6:9). Both are God in heaven and God on earth, God above and God below, God involved and God separated from God’s creatures.

The Attributes of God

While there are many passages in the Hebrew Bible praising God's vast knowledge, the Hebrew Bible does not depict YHVH as having infallible knowledge of the future, especially regarding future human choices.

For example, at the *akedah*, although it is Elohim who tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, it is an angel of YHVH who declares to Abraham: "Do not raise your hand against the lad, for *now* I know that you fear Elohim" (Genesis 22:12). At Genesis 6:6 it is YHVH who regrets having created humanity, and at 1 Samuel 15:35 it is YHVH who regrets ever having made Saul king of Israel. They have disappointed YHVH's expectations for the future. And it is YHVH who speaks of what "perhaps" will be in the future (for example, Ezekial 12:1–3; Jeremiah 26:2–3; see Fretheim 1984: Chapter 4). And YHVH changes His mind from time to time in light of new circumstances (for instance in Jeremiah 18). These and similar verses might serve as a scriptural basis for the view of "open theism" that God has only probabilistic knowledge of the future and might be surprised by future events (Wierenga 2011; for open theism see Pinnock, Rice, Sanders, Hasker, and Basinger 1994).

Likewise, although God has vast power, there is no explicit attribution of perfect power, omnipotence, to God in the Hebrew Bible. In Genesis 18:14, YHVH assures Abraham that Sarah is not too old to have a son, and does say, "Is anything beyond the power of YHVH?" But this is most plausibly saying only that God is "almighty," having power over all things in the world, rather than omnipotent, having the power to do just "anything" (see Geach 2009). And YHVH, again bearing the more human-like face of God, appears not to be omnipresent (see Gericke 2005: 677–99). There is no doubt, however, that the God of the Hebrew Bible is the most perfect being in existence and of a different order of greatness than that of any other existant.

Talmudic Times

In Talmudic times, the rabbis extended the clusters surrounding, respectively, Elohim and YHVH, to what I call "God_E" and "God_Y." With the rabbis, Elohim and YHVH came to be identified with two different attributes:

Says Rabbi Samuel ben Nachman, "Wherever it says, 'YHVH' – the characteristic of mercy. . . . Wherever it says, 'Elohim' – the characteristic of justice."
(*Genesis Rabbah* 33:8)

Elohim is the God of "justice," in two senses. Elohim is the *ruler* who has decreed order in the world, so that the stars and all heavenly bodies stay on their course and the lower world proceeds on fixed laws. And Elohim is the *judge* who judges the actions of humanity according to strict laws. The *name* of God, "YHVH," connoting a degree of intimacy, designated the God of mercy. The title of God, "Elohim," connoting an official position, designated the ruler who fixed order and who sat on the seat of justice.

The Talmudic era was one of destruction and exile, of a sense of God's estrangement from God's people. In the Talmudic period, in a move of consolation, the rabbis affirmed that merciful YHVH overshadowed Elohim. God's justice regularly yielded to God's mercy. Elohim created the world in Genesis 1 but in Genesis 2–3 this quickly becomes "YHVH-Elohim." Said the rabbis: Elohim saw that the world could not endure only with justice, and so Elohim was forced to mix mercy with justice, hence, "YHVH-Elohim."

The Jewish God

And for the rabbis, God_y who is so close and so loving, becomes so close as to emerge not only as God of the Jews, but as “the Jewish God,” the God who is Jewish. He is, as it were, one of the tribe, what Frank Moore Cross calls a “divine kinsman” (Cross 1998). For the rabbis, God is “re’acha,” a “fellow-person,” a kinsman to the Jews (see *Midrash Tanchuma*, *Exodus*, *Yitro*, 5, 1972/73: 313), and *Midrash Rabbah*, *Exodus* 6:1 and 27:1 and *Leviticus* 8:6), “re’acha,” being the term usually translated as “neighbor” in “Love thy neighbor.” Thus does God_y become one of us.

Building on the Hebrew Bible’s image of God the Father, an ubiquitous image of God in rabbinic literature is of God the *king* who is also *father* of the Jewish people. There are hundreds of texts in the rabbinic literature comparing God’s relationship to the Jews to that of a king toward his people or son and daughter. The Israelites were to have a king only from one of them (Deuteronomy 17:15). Just so is God one of them. While a king may be all justice and strictness, as father the king is merciful to the child. In the parables of God the king-father, the king is normally merciful, with the character of God_y, rather than God_e.

Here is a good example of a parable about the king-father of the Jews, a comment on Hoseah 11:8–9. There YHVH angrily laments the sinfulness of His people, then suddenly the lament breaks off with this: “My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger.” On these verses we find:

Said Rabbi Eliezer: It is like a king who became angry at his son, and who had in his hand a sword. The king swore he would pass the sword on his son because the latter angered him. But later the king said, If I do so, my son will no longer live. But also, he could not nullify the royal decree. What did the king do? He placed the sword into its scabbard and thus passed the sword on his son’s head. Said Rabbi Hanina: It is like a king who became angry with his son. He had in front of him a large stone and swore that he would throw it on him. But later the king said: If I throw it at him he will no longer live. What did the king do? He crushed the stone and made it into small pebbles and threw them on his son one at a time. It turned out that he neither hurt his son nor nullified his royal decree.

(*Midrash Tehillim* I)

Just so, because of God the king-father’s mercy the Jews are being punished with exile, and not being destroyed!

God the Observant Jew

The God who is *Jewish* observes the commandments incumbent upon Jewish men (see Patton 2009: Chapter 8). At Mt Sinai, YHVH appears cloaked in a *tallit*, the prayer shawl of the Jews, and acting as a synagogue prayer leader instructs Moses in the order of prayer (Babylonian Talmud, *Rosh Hashanah* 17b). YHVH wears the prayer appurtenances, *tefillin*, worn traditionally by Jewish men, and appears to Moses wearing them. In the Jews’ *tefillin* it is written: “Hear O Israel, YHVH is our Eloha, YHVH is one.” In an expression of God’s closeness, regarding God’s *tefillin* we find this rabbinic teaching:

Said R. Nahman b. Isaac to R. Hiyya b. Abin: What is written in the *tefillin* of the Master of the Universe?—He replied to him: Who can be compared to Your people Israel, a unique nation upon the earth.

(Chr. 17:21)

As a good Jewish man, God studies the Torah for the first third of every day (Babylonian Talmud, *Avodah Zarah* 3b). When God buries Moses, God, like a Jewish person, must be purified from the defilement of the dead body. But whereas mortal Jews become purified in water, as befitting God, God becomes purified in fire (Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 39a). When God's Temple is destroyed God undertakes the mourning customs of a Jewish king (*Lamentations Rabbah* 1:1). And as a good Jew, God also prays! God prays that God's mercy should overcome God's justice (Babylonian Talmud *Berachot* 7a). And God asks others to pray for Him as well (Babylonian Talmud *Berachot* 7a).

After creation, God continues to observe the Jewish Sabbath, every week, by resting. So the question arises: how could God bring rain and winds on the Sabbath if he is supposed to be resting? And Rabbi Akiva responds that God does so within the boundaries of Jewish law (*Genesis Rabbah* 11)! God also visits the sick and celebrates Jewish marriages. And finally, when the people go into exile or suffer, God goes with them, in exile, suffering as a Jew, together with the Jews.

Whether the passages teaching that God observes the Torah laws are taken "literally" or metaphorically, they not only humanize God but Judaize God as well.

Since God the Father, YHVH, was Jewish, it should not surprise that in a new religion that arose among Jews, the Son of God the Father was Jewish as well. And since God the Father observes what God commanded to others, it should be no great surprise that in a new religion that arose from Judaism, God observes a commandment He once gave to another father. Thus, God sacrifices God's own son, however doing so now to perfection, so that this time the son actually dies.

Medieval Jewish Philosophy

Saadia ben Joseph

When Jewish philosophy arose in the world, God_y yielded much of the ground back to God_e. The shift is pronounced already at the start, with Saadia ben Joseph (882–942), the first systematic Jewish philosopher. Although Saadia makes allusion to the rabbinic distinction between YHVH as merciful and Elohim as judge, his philosophy roundly favors God_e over God_y. God is known by reason. The God of reason is reached via philosophical arguments for the creation of the world and by God's rational justice as revealed in the *laws* of the Torah. Thus does God_e take center stage from God_y. Saadia proves God's existence with four proofs of creation, and proves that creation was *ex nihilo*. (Interestingly, the ontological argument never surfaces in Jewish sources. Instead, cosmological arguments, with design arguments dominate.) And Saadia proves the truth of Torah from the rationality of laws in the Torah.

Thus the God for Saadia is the God who creates the world and is the source of the just and proper laws given to the Jews, in short a God after God_e. True, for Saadia, tradition, going all the way back to the Sinai revelation, is a source of knowledge. But it is only a *derivative* source of knowledge, consequent upon rational argumentation as to its truth.

The God of Saadia is a God of reason and justice, fixing order in the world and in the affairs of humanity. In short, the God of Saadia is God_E.

Maimonides

The eclipse of God_Y by God_E comes to rich fruition in Maimonides (1135–1204). Although Philo (20 BCE–50 CE) anticipated some of this, and Abraham ibn Daud (c.1110–80) expresses some of the same ideas, it was Maimonides whose forceful and most articulate formulations had a strong effect on Jewish philosophy. In his legal work, *Mishneh Torah*, when recording the commandment to believe in God, although he mentions YHVH, he tilts strongly toward the God of Genesis 1, God_E, the God of creation:

The foundation of all foundations and the pillar of all wisdoms is to know that there exists a first existent, and it brings to exist all [other] existents . . . This existent is the God [Eloha] of the world, the sovereign of the entire land; and it moves the sphere with a force that has no end. . . . And knowledge of *this* is a positive commandment, as it says, “I am YHVH your Elohim.”

(Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of the Foundations of the Torah 1:1,
my translation and my emphasis)

Maimonides does not cast God here as the redeemer from Egypt or as the giver of the Torah. And when Maimonides advises how to achieve love and fear of God, he does not turn to the God of revelation or to the God of salvation, but once again to the God of creation:

What is the way to the love and fear of [God]? When a person contemplates His great, wondrous creations and creatures and when he sees in them His infinite wisdom, he will at once love, praise, and adulate, and have great desire to know the Great Name . . . and he will be deterred and will be afraid.

(Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of the Foundations of the Torah 2:2,
my translation)

Maimonides goes on, in the same legal work, to spend several chapters outlining the wonders of creation so as to arouse the reader’s love and fear of God.

Matching Maimonides’ focus on God_E is his naturalizing of prophecy in *Guide of the Perplexed* and his thus neutralizing intimacy with the God of revelation, God_Y. The prophet, according to Maimonides, reaches prophecy by perfecting the self, thereby connecting naturally to the Active Intellect from which the prophet receives his prophetic wisdom. At most (Maimonides scholars are divided about this), God might intervene to withhold prophecy, but does not *grant* prophetic status. The personal, active relationship between God and the prophet disappears. As a result, the chosenness of the Jewish people, as signifying an intimacy between God and the people, also disappears.

Maimonides rarely refers to the Jews as the “chosen people.” For him the Jews are simply the people of Moses, the prophet who knew God’s mind, as it were (Kellner 1991, 1995: Chapter 2). It is not preposterous to propose that for Maimonides, had Moses been a Hittite, then the Hittites would have been the recipients of his legislation, not the Israelites.

Furthermore, in his *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides ignores the dynamic construal of the name “YHVH” for the sake of a static interpretation of God’s self-identification as “absolute existence” (1:61, 63), an interpretation shared by Aquinas and other medieval metaphysicians. And in the same work Maimonides stresses at length the unknowable nature of YHVH over YHVH’s nearness.

Maimonides showcases proofs of God’s existence whose conclusions are that there exists a first cause, one, simple, and necessary. And he casts Father Abraham as a philosopher who comes to know of God by philosophical argument. Officially, Maimonides’ God is a perfect being, omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good. God is also simple, having no parts, no inner complexity. Yet, at times, and from what follows from some things he says, or hints at, the God of Maimonides could well be taken to be a super-form meant to explain the intelligibility of reality and of the capacity of the human mind to grasp that intelligibility. Thus does Maimonides assimilate God to a philosophical derivative of the God of creation, God_E.

Judah Ha-Levi

The Maimonidean emphasis on God_E and his distancing of God_Y from closeness to his people, had a great influence on subsequent Jewish philosophy. But there was one voice, preceding Maimonides, that protested loudly, before Blaise Pascal (1623–62), against the “God of the philosophers,” in favor of the “God of Abraham.” This was Judah Ha-Levi, the Spanish-Jewish poet and philosopher (c.1075–1141). In his *Kuzari*, Ha-Levi maintained that philosophers can know only of God_E and not God_Y. God_E can be the conclusion of an argument from creation, but not God_Y. God_Y can be known only through prophetic experience. “YHVH,” for Ha-Levi, is the name of “someone who speaks to you.” Adam, says Ha-Levi, would not have known of God_Y unless the latter had spoken to him. Thus, when the Hebrew Bible speaks of the “Face” of God, it is almost always the face of YHVH, not Elohim. For Ha-Levi, the referential chain that fixes the referent of “YHVH,” reaches back to the experiences of those to whom God spoke.

In keeping with the preference for God_Y, Ha-Levi supports the dynamic reading of “*eheyeh asher eheyeh*.” Not “I am that I am,” a cold, metaphysical declaration of God’s necessary being, but, “I am present and will be present whenever you need me.” To Ha-Levi, the God of the philosophers is the “God of Aristotle,” but the God of the Jews is YHVH, the God of Abraham. When God_Y introduced Himself to the Israelites in the Ten Commandments, says Ha-Levi, God_Y did not say, “I am YHVH who created the world,” but, “I am YHVH who took you out of Egypt.” Abraham knew YHVH because YHVH spoke with him. And the Israelites knew YHVH because YHVH spoke to *them*. Thus does Ha-Levi champion the special relationship between the Jews and God_Y.

The Kabbalah

God Disappears

Parallel to Jewish medieval philosophy arose the Jewish mystical literature of the Kabbalah. In the Kabbalah YHVH and Elohim do not disappear, but they do not appear as two faces of the Supreme Being—“God.” They are demoted, enmeshed in a complex supernal network. At the apex of reality for Kabbalah is the *einsof*, the Infinite, beyond

comprehension, also called the “*a’yin*,” the “nothing,” in whose deepest essence lies the *efes*, an absolute absence, a “zero.” From the *einsof*, ten “*sefirot*,” emanations (singular: *sefirah*), arise in descending order from the Infinite, in replicative layers called “worlds.” These ten have different powers that they pour downward ultimately to the material world. YHVH and Elohim are but two distinct *sefirot* out of the ten. YHVH, in agreement with rabbinic thought, is an emanation of the power of mercy, and Elohim of the power of justice. The giver of the Torah is indeed YHVH, but now appearing only as one of ten emanations from the unknowable Infinite. Indeed, YHVH and Elohim are both of lower rank than other emanations.

The “Tenity”

This arrangement led to great criticism by Jewish scholars. The charge was that the kabbalists believed in a “Tenity,” as anti-monotheistic, to their minds, as the Christian Trinity. Here is how Rabbi Isaac bar Sheshet Parfat (1326–1408) formulated the charge:

The kabbalists pray once to this *sefirah* and then to another *sefirah*, as the prayer requires. . . . And that is very strange to a person who is not a kabbalist like they are, and they [the non-kabbalists] think that this is belief in a multiplicity [of Gods]. I have heard a philosopher speak in a defaming manner of the kabbalists, and he used to say: “The Gentiles [Christians] are believers in a trinity, and the kabbalist believers in a tenity.”

(*Responsa* Section 157)

The kabbalist, Rabbi Moshe Haim Luzzato (1707–46), rebutted this charge as follows:

The enemies of the Wisdom of Truth have called the believers in it, “Believers in ten-ity.” . . . They have said, “Anybody who believes in Divinity other than His, is but a denier of the God of Israel.” And we answer them by saying that the *sefirot* are not separate from the one who emanates, for they are like the flame connected to the coal, and all is one, a unity that has within it no division.

(*Sefer Kinat Adonai Zivaot*, Part 1)

What Kabbalah hath torn asunder, the Jews have the power to put back together. For the ten *sefirot* can constitute a world of “detachment,” of fragmentation, in which there is no organic unity among the *sefirot*, or they can constitute a world of “unity,” where all the *sefirot* are bound in a comprehensively united whole. The unity is effected through and surrounding YHVH, the power of mercy. In observing the commandments, the Jews theurgically effect unity in the Divine sphere, mending the supernal world—*tikkun olam*. Thus, while YHVH and Elohim do not become one reality, justice and mercy are combined as in a standard “God.” Eventually, the united structures of the repeating world will ascend back into the Infinite from which they came. Thus does Kabbalah empower the Jews to theurgically bring about redemption for the entire world.

Some versions of Kabbalah have been interpreted as panentheistic, that is that all is *included* in God, but that God is more than what is properly included in God (Idel

1995: 17–8). But in light of the above remarks about a supreme being with recognizable attributes, it might be better to dub these views “*pan-einsof-ism*.” Alternatively, we could see the *einsof* as the “God” beyond “God” (to borrow from Meister Eckhart).

Baruch Spinoza

Baruch (Benedictus) Spinoza (1632–77) deserves to be included in the Jewish story because although he did not think of himself as providing a “Jewish” philosophy, he drew out to the end the implications of Maimonides’ philosophy. Spinoza made God_E triumphant. Spinoza cuts the cord that ties the Jewish people to God as “God’s chosen people,” replacing that notion with that of the Israelites having, as it were, chosen God. The ancient Israelites made a covenant between themselves, according to Spinoza, to serve God. The actual, special, intimate mutuality between God and the Jews, which is nurtured by God_Y, disappears. Spinoza’s concept of God precludes the notion of “choice” or “purpose” in creation, since, according to Spinoza, all has been determined by necessity from the divine nature that exists necessarily and all comes to exist by impersonal cause and effect (see Novak 1995: Chapter 1). Indeed in Spinoza’s philosophy there cannot be mutuality between God and any human being. Spinoza’s God is a spin-off of Elohim, is God_E, the God of the cosmos, the God of nature.

Spinoza promulgated a monistic pantheism (or, a “panentheism,” if we confine the “world” to the physical and mental). There exists only one substance, God, in which inhere an infinity of attributes, the mental and physical being only two of them. This signifies a severe break from earlier Jewish philosophy (though bearing some affinity to certain kabbalistic views) and not many religious Jews were willing to follow. Nonetheless, Spinoza had a fervent following among Jewish rebels against the tradition, and still has such today among present-day proclaimed “secularists” in Israel (Yovel 1989a, 1989b).

Hasidism

Cleaving to God

The wheel turns once again with the advent of the Hasidic movement in eighteenth-century Eastern Europe. It was as though God_Y arranged for a comeback among the Jewish people after being utterly abandoned by Spinoza. Building on Deuteronomy’s language of cleaving to God (see, for instance, Deuteronomy 4:4), the central religious principle of Hasidism was *devekut*, or “cleaving,” a mystical communion, to the point of amalgamation with God. As put by the first Hasidic work ever published by Rabbi Yaakov Yoseph of Polonoya (d. 1782): “For the purpose of the entire Torah is to enable us to cleave to God and love Him. . . . The 613 commandments are counsels on how to achieve cleaving to Him, may He be Blessed” (Yoseph of Polonoya 1973/74: Volume 1, 7).

God is present and palpable for the Hasidim, who generally favored panentheism. The motto of the initiator of Hasidism, Israel Baal Shem Tov (1698–1760) was “There is no place devoid of God,” borrowed from the kabbalistic *Tikunei Zohar* (57). All of Jewish law has as its telos *devekut*, with the 613 “commandments” becoming “strategies” on how to cleave to God. Such was his instrumentalism that Israel Baal Shem Tov reportedly instructed his followers to interrupt their Torah studies (the supreme rabbinic religious act!) from time to time in order to recreate their cleaving to God.

There were two disparate expressions of the Hasidic mood. One, while promoting cleaving to God, recoiled from addressing God as “Thou.” Thus Israel Baal Shem Tov declared: “If a person thinks he is cleaving to God, then that person is far from God. . . . So if he thinks of God as ‘Thou,’ then God is for him only a ‘He’” (Yoseph of Polonoya 1973/74: Volume 1, 374). The other direction in Hasidism did not hesitate to engage God in the most familiar, human terms. A most extreme form of this Hasidic orientation was with the Hasidic master, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev (1740–1809), who argued with God for the sake of the Jewish people. He charged God with being too strict a father and complained that God should look at the merits of God’s people rather than at their sins. It is reported that once the rabbi became so impatient with God’s behavior that he spoke these words to God: “Good morning to you, YHVH, Master of the universe. I, Levi Yitzhak, son of Sarah of Berdichev, I come to you with a court summons from your people Israel” (Dresner 1974: 86). And he complained: “What have you against your people Israel? Why do you pick on your people Israel?”

In the twentieth century, the Hasidic mood of engagement with God was developed most famously by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–72), scion of an illustrious Hasidic dynasty. To Heschel the basic truth was that God was in search of “Man,” as he then put it, although “Man” did not always respond in kind. Sadly, God is *not* our ultimate concern, as Paul Tillich would have it. Rather, we are *God’s* ultimate concern (Heschel 1987). Furthermore, Heschel argued strongly against Medieval Jewish philosophers and Kant for depleting God of emotions, claiming in opposition to them an *anthropopathic* concept of God, a God possessed of real emotions that God readily expressed (Heschel 1975). God engages with us through what Heschel calls “Divine pathos,” engaging us with passion and concern.

In sum, in the Hasidic ethos we see in modern Jewish history a deepening and broadening of an orientation centrally dedicated to an extension of earlier ideas about God_Y.

Modern Jewish Philosophy

Meanwhile, back in philosophy. The story of modern Jewish philosophy is one of a pulling in opposite directions, one toward God_E and the other to God_Y. Here I present one representative of the first direction: the early Hermann Cohen (1842–1918) (hereafter: just “Hermann Cohen” unless otherwise noted), and two of the second: Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929), a student of Cohen, and Martin Buber (1878–1965).

Hermann Cohen

Hermann Cohen, one of the first Jews allowed to teach at a German university, continued Spinoza’s abandonment of God_Y in favor of God_E, but for reasons very different from Spinoza’s (Guttman 1966: 400–16; Novak 1995: Chapter 2). Cohen was a neo-Kantian, and in his earlier works took a starkly Kantian, autonomous view of ethics, and, like Kant, saw God as a postulate of reason. But, for Cohen, God was not the guarantee of ethical happiness, as for Kant, but a postulate of a ground, an “origin,” that guarantees “a necessary congruence of natural and moral teleology” (Guttman 1966: 402). God is the ground of ethics. But ethics must be able to be implemented, and the idea of God functions also as that which makes possible the implementation of ethics in nature. Hence, God guarantees that nature fits the teleology of ethics, including the most basic

of all, by securing the existence of humankind. God guarantees, that is, a unity of ethics and the character of nature.

According to Cohen, for nature to be congruent with ethics is for the world to be conducive to unending ethical progress. The “messianic age” of ethical perfection becomes an ideal toward which nature guarantees progress but which is never reached. And here the Jews, finally, come in. For the real “Torah” for Cohen was the universal moral law, created and promulgated by the prophets, embedded within the array of particularistic laws applying to Jews only. The Jews were the keepers of the pure message of the “messianic” ideal for the future, a symbolic representation of the unending ethical progress toward a “messianic” kingdom. The Jewish ritual law had the purpose only of keeping the Jews distinct so as to insure their existence in this role.

God, for early Cohen, was nowhere to be met with in the world, never to be experienced, and had no relationship with humanity. Cohen’s God, at this point, is a God of reason, a universal God; God at the *origin* of ontological and ethical order, as it were a “creator” God: a God in stark contrast to God_γ, and a family resemblant of the earlier God_E. In Jewish philosophy, God_γ had absorbed yet another blow, and was about to succumb, done in by a Jewish follower of Immanuel Kant. Of Cohen’s God, Martin Buber wrote that “Cohen has constructed the last home for the God of the philosopher” (Buber 1997: 58).

Later, Cohen modified his conception of God (though scholars debate to what extent a real change took place) by allowing that God grants love and compassion, a model for human love and compassion. This was followed up by Franz Rosenzweig, who fell in love with the God of love, and by Martin Buber, who nurtured an I–Thou relationship with God, both modern versions of the rabbinic God of mercy, God_γ.

Franz Rosenzweig

For Rosenzweig, in his *Star of Redemption*, “creation” does not refer to a long ago act, but to God’s ever-present intimate relation to the world. This relation is known through ongoing “revelation,” God’s revelation of God’s self to individuals. Nothing else is known about God save what is revealed in the experience of the divine presence. And what is revealed is God’s love. No *mysterium tremendum* of Rudolph Otto (1869–1937) for Rosenzweig; God’s “one” commandment is the imperative to an individual: “Love me!” All other “commandments” flow from this and are expressions of it. Only a lover can issue such a command, and so there ensues a mutuality of love. It is then God’s love of us that makes possible for us the love of other persons, which is an “after-affect” (a lovely term I owe to Joseph Turner) of the divine love in human experience. We return God’s love by first loving God, and then expressing our love of God by turning our love outward into the world (“redemption”), much as God directs God’s love out into the world. Our human love, in turn, deepens our love of God.

For Rosenzweig, God’s ongoing revelation is to individual persons, and individuals are to respond “redemptively” to God’s self-disclosure by directing their love toward the world and bringing into existence a community of love. The Jews, says Rosenzweig, created themselves as a community based on the experience of God’s self-revelation of love. Thus, the chief task of the Jews is to hold fast to *revelation* as a focus of God’s love in a community. The task of Christianity, in turn, is to flow outward from revelation, to actively spread “redemption” outward to the world in the name of the God of love. While Rosenzweig’s God is also one of justice, Rosenzweig tightly embraced a variant of

YHVH, the intimate God of the Hebrew Bible and the merciful God of the Talmudic era, God_γ.

Martin Buber

The same was true for Rosenzweig's friend and colleague, Martin Buber. If Spinoza broke the special connection between God and the Jewish people for the sake of God_β, Martin Buber at first did practically the same, only then to reinstate the connection to God_γ in a new way. In his *I and Thou*, Buber speaks of an *individual*, "dialogical" I–Thou relationship with God. For Buber, God can be known only as a thou in an individual I–Thou relationship with God. But, in reverse of Rosenzweig, that relationship must first be mediated through an I–Thou relationship between human beings. In the I–Thou relationship to another person as "thou," the I passes through the human "thou" to the Thou of God. There may be an intimate "relationship" between a person and God, but none between a people and God. Thus is God_γ, who in the Hebrew Bible makes local appearances to both individuals and the Israelite nation, transformed into a God who "thous" individuals only.

Later, Buber reinstated the "choseness" of the Jews as having a "God-given" task to create a "dialogical society." Of the Jewish people Buber says:

I am far from wishing to contend that the conception and the experience of the dialogical situation are confined to Judaism. But I am certain that no other community of human beings has entered with such strength and fervor into this experience as have the Jews.

(Buber 1997: 16)

However, this remained a minor theme in Buber's writings.

Thus do Rosenzweig and Buber retrieve the God of intimacy, God_γ, from the hands of Spinoza and the neo-Kantians. The trajectory of modern Jewish philosophy since this pair has heavily favored God_γ.

Neo-Mysticism

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935) picks up on panentheistic trends in the history of the mystical Kabbalah to develop an elaborate dipolar conception of God, anticipating some of the ideas of later dipolar theism (see Hartshorne 1962). In *Orot Hakodesh*, Rabbi Kook argues that there are two basic types of values: (1) value due to a stable, static feature, and (2) value that comes from achievement, in a process of attainment. Since God is perfect, God must have both types of value, and those to a perfect degree. Thus, God must have *shlemut*, perfection, as well as *hishtalmut*, "perfectionization" (my word). The first perfection is possessed by God in God's unchanging attributes. The second is possessed by God by way of the created order, which is included in the very being of God. Every achievement of value in the world signifies an increment of value in the very being of God. God has this dynamic value to a perfect degree both because *everything* in world-reality contributes to the process of value-accretion and because the process is never-ending, an *infinite* achievement of more and more value.

Predicated on the nineteenth-century faith in progress, as well as a bit of Hegel, Rabbi Kook believed that created reality was going to go to ever higher attainments of value, with dips in between (for instance, World War I) which would contribute to the next stage of advancement. All of the evil in the world was necessary to an achievement of a better world, adding to the attained *hishtalmut* value in God. The God of *perfection* might be God_p, but the God of incremental value is as close to us as our own breath, God_y.

The Holocaust

The massive destruction of European (and some non-European) Jews leading up to and during World War II has brought massive unbelief to the Jewish world and led to the creation of radically new theologies of God. During those times, millions of Jews were murdered, tortured, and agonizingly brutalized. Those who survived were marked with scars far deeper than the heart can reach. The suffering of the surviving parents has in many cases been handed down to the second generation and even to the third. The destruction, dislocation, and desolation of the Jewish people in the European Destruction have constituted, for many, a devastating attack on the very idea that there is a God who is morally perfect, omniscient, and omnipotent, let alone a God who loves the Jewish people. Many agree with Rabbi Irving Greenberg when he eloquently declares concerning the Holocaust discourse that: "No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children" (I. Greenberg 1977: 23).

Various revisionist theologies have appeared in response to the European Destruction. These include that God abandoned the Jews, that God "hid his face," that God withdrew from history for good, that God is far from being perfect, and that God violated the covenant, as a result of which Jews are no longer bound by the covenant. Such theologies tend to associate the Holocaust with a profound, disappointing, change in God, of one sort or another. As a result, such theologies agree that a radical change must be wrought in the Jews' concept of God. On the other hand, some Ultra-Orthodox continue to insist that no change in the concept of God is necessary, since the murder of six million Jews was punishment . . . for the sins of Jews who were not Ultra-Orthodox (G. Greenberg 2004).

A Vulnerable God

One thinker who endured the suffering of the Warsaw Ghetto and was murdered in the Majdanek death camp in Poland, adopted for himself a theology of a vulnerable God. This was Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapiro (1889–1943), the Hasidic "Rebbe" of Piecetzna, Poland. For him the Destruction was too enormous, too grotesque, too inflicting of human misery, to be explained as an event in the history of God's relation to the Jews.

So the Rebbe has no recourse but to say, "There are travails that we suffer with Him. . . 'Save those who suffer your suffering!' For Israel also suffers His suffering" (Shapiro 1960/61: 191). What was happening could have been nothing less than a catastrophic upheaval *within the very being of God*, a heartbreaking earthquake taking place in the ground of all being. Only that could explain the enormity of the tragedy. It must be that God was violently shaken-up in the innermost places within himself. And so, God must

be enduring great suffering. And the Jews, aye, the Jews, God's "chosen people," are the place in God's creation where the waves of Divine suffering vibrate most violently, felt far beyond mortal endurance. The Shoah is a reverberation of God's suffering in creation, with Jewish suffering a figuration of a catastrophic upheaval in God. (The Nazis were not to be exonerated on this theology, just as Pharaoh was not exculpated for carrying out God's earlier decree of slavery and exile to Abraham's descendants.)

Perhaps, indeed, a fragility exists somewhere very deep in (a di-polar?) God that requires loving care on the part of God's creatures and a sharing by them in God's suffering. The ultimate mutuality between God, and his creation would come to expression exactly there.

Conclusion

Meanwhile, as the philosophers and the theologians, the mystics and the rationalists, were propounding their ideas of Jewish theism, over millennia prayer to YHVH continued, for wisdom, for grace, for health, for rain, and for redemption of the Jewish people. YHVH has been for us a most personal being who listens to prayers and, at times, finds our prayers worthy of positive response. YHVH is a God who continues to accompany God's people through history, going into exile with them. As far as the Jewish people were concerned, the God of the Jews was a Jewish God.

Related Topics

Chapter 1: Western Philosophy; Chapter 20: Philosophy of Religion

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4

CHRISTIANITY

William J. Wainwright

Christianity and “Bare” Theism

If theism is defined as a belief in the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, all good creator and ruler of all things in heaven and earth, then Christianity entails theism. While Christianity also entails much more (including a belief in God’s triunity, incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth, and redemption in and through the latter’s death and resurrection), appeals to “bare theism” (that is, theism as abstracted from the peculiarities of any particular religious tradition) are not uncommon in Christian discourse. They have at least two uses.

They are sometimes employed to establish common ground. Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Contra Gentiles*, for instance, was at least in part directed toward Muslims who already believed in God’s existence. In that context philosophical proofs of God’s existence, omniscience, and the like were designed to secure a common foundation which could then be used as a basis upon which to argue for specifically Christian tenets. Aquinas and his Dominican patrons “may [also] . . . have thought that the *Summa Contra Gentiles* was precisely the sort of work needed by Christian missionaries . . . who were faced with the high intellectual culture of” Muslim Spain, “and especially with . . . Arabian Aristotelianism” (Pegis 1955: 21). Or to cite another example, the Jesuit missionary Roberto de Nobili (1577–1656) used a version of Aquinas’ five ways to establish common ground with (primarily theistic) Hindus (Clayton 1987: 11–13).

Again, since Christianity entails theism, it is false if bare theism is false. It is not surprising, then, that defenses of bare theism figure largely in Christian apologetics of the last three hundred years where the enemy is often atheism or agnosticism.

Christians have never thought that bare theism was sufficient, however. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century deists, on the other hand, believed that it was. In their view, peculiarly Christian doctrines such as the Trinity were absurd. Deists also thought that bare theism provided everything needed for salvation. In their opinion, *true* religion is “natural religion,” a body of truths about God and our duty that can be discovered by natural reason. These truths included a belief in God’s existence, justice, and benevolence; in immortality; and in the dictates of common morality. It also included a belief in God’s providential government. (It was not until late in the eighteenth century that the term “deism” began to be used to refer to a belief in an “absentee” God who, having created the world and ordained its laws, left it to its own devices. The classical deists did not reject notions of divine providence.)

Some self-styled “Christian” deists accepted biblical revelation although they believed that its core content was identical with natural religion. Most deists dismissed revealed

religions as fictions, however. God wants his creatures to be happy and has ordained virtue as a means to it. Because God's benevolence is disinterested, he will ensure that everyone has easy access to the knowledge needed for happiness. Salvation cannot, then, depend on special revelation. True religion is an expression of a universal human nature whose essence is reason and which is the same in all times and places. Religious traditions such as Christianity or Islam, on the other hand, originate in a mixture of credulity, political tyranny, and priest craft which corrupts reason and overlays natural religion with numerous impurities.

All were convinced that Christian doctrines offend reason. John Toland (1670–1722), for example, asserted that Christian priests and theologians have gone even further than the hierophants of the ancient mystery cults. The latter swore their initiates to secrecy but their mysteries were intelligible in themselves. Only Christians dared maintain that their doctrines were mysterious in a more radical sense, “that is, inconceivable in themselves, however clearly revealed” (Toland 1696: 73).

Christians have a number of responses to this. One of the more common is that “mysteries” are only to be expected if theism is true. For one thing, our capacities are limited. As Jonathan Edwards argued, “a very great superiority, even in beings of the same nature as ourselves” makes many of their actions, intentions, and assertions “incomprehensible and attended with inexplicable intricacies.” Witness the relation that “little children” bear to “adult persons,” for example, or the “vulgar” to “learned men, [or] great philosophers and mathematicians.” God “is *infinitely* diverse from and above all in his nature,” however. So if God vouchsafes a revelation of himself (of his triune nature, say) “which is entirely diverse [not only] from anything we do now experience in our present situation, but from anything that we can be conscious or immediately sensible of in any state whatsoever that our nature can be in, then especially may mysteries be expected in such a revelation” (Edwards 2004: 370–1). Again, Aquinas and the earlier theological tradition argued that reason can establish God's simplicity. Yet if God truly is simple, i.e., if there is no ontological distinction between God's essence, existence, and real properties, then no positive characterization of God is strictly true since “all our propositional thought and speech is necessarily carried on by making distinctions” (Alston 2005: 101).

Moreover, in spite of the protestations of the deists, it is by no means clear that bare theism is significantly more successful in passing the bar of reason than Christianity. Atheists and agnostics clearly think that it isn't. The more important point, however, is this. Let C and T refer to Christianity and (bare) theism, respectively. C entails T. So if the probability of T on a piece of evidence, *e*, is *n*, then the probability of C on *e* can't be any higher than *n*. (If *p* entails *q*, *q* is at least as probable on *e* as *p* is on *e*, that is, the probability of *p* on *e* can't be higher than the probability of *q* on *e*. The probability of *p* on *e* must therefore be at least as low as the probability of *q* on *e*.) Thus if the probability of T on *e* is less than 0.5, for example, then the probability of C on *e* must also be less than 0.5.

But on the other hand, if the probability of C on our *total* evidence (including *e*) is *greater* than 0.5, then (since C entails T), the probability of T on *e* (together with the rest of our evidence) must itself be greater than 0.5. Furthermore, while C can't be *more* probable than T if C entails T, C *can* be more probable than the *conjunction* of T and *not-C*. Consider a logically similar case. Let C = (*p* & *q*) = (I will *not* draw an ace from a standard deck *and* the coin will come up heads). Let T = *q* = the coin will come up heads. Thus C entails T. $\Pr(C) = \Pr(p \ \& \ q) = 12/13 \times 1/2 = 6/13$ (since *p* and *q* are

logically independent). $\Pr(T \ \& \ \text{not-}C) = \Pr(q \ \& \ [\text{not-}p \vee \text{not-}q]) = \Pr([q \ \& \ \text{not-}p] \vee [q \ \& \ \text{not-}q]) = \Pr(q \ \& \ \text{not-}p) = 1/2 \times 1/13 = 1/26$. Since $6/13 > 1/26$, $\Pr(C) > \Pr(T \ \& \ \text{not-}C)$. We will return to this important point later.

Deistic and Christian Conceptions of Sound Reason

A deeper problem is perhaps this. Important strands of Christianity would view the deist's conception of "sound reason" as flawed.

(1) If we restrict the deliverances of sound reason to propositions which are self-evident or can be established by arguments which would convince every intelligent, fair-minded, and adequately informed person, as the deists appear to do, then no interesting claims about God, immortality, morality, or any other fundamental issue rest on sound reason—including those made by deists. For it is by no means difficult to find intelligent, fair-minded, and adequately informed persons who think that theism is false or that Christianity is true.

(2) Nor is it clear (as deists seem to think) that the only relevant evidence is *public* evidence or evidence that can be reproduced on demand. Restricting evidence in this way rules out in advance a subject's taking his mystical experiences or other apparent perceptions of God as evidence since his *experiences* (as distinguished from their *report*) are private and not reproducible on demand. And this seems unreasonable. Again, as John Henry Newman pointed out, even when our convictions do ultimately rest on public evidence we cannot always reproduce that evidence on demand. For example, a historian of the Middle Ages may assert that the *Aeneid* could not be a thirteenth-century forgery. Her conviction is partly based on her knowledge of the capacities of the medieval mind. This knowledge depends on a lifetime of reading and study. Many of the considerations that contributed to it have been forgotten, however, and others have merged into a general impression of what the medieval mind could and could not do. Her knowledge is nonetheless quite real (see Newman 1979: 237).

(3) Part of the deist's problem with revealed religion lies in his insistence that, to be credible, truths of scripture must be capable of being established without recourse to it. But this is problematic. That a credible epistemic faculty or tool or rule can be used to assess the credentials of another epistemic faculty or tool or rule does not imply that opinions formed by a reason that does not employ that faculty or tool or rule can be used to determine the truth or falsity of opinions established by its means. The naked eye, for example, "determines the goodness and sufficiency" of the optic glass, yet it would be absurd for a person to "credit no representation made by the glass, wherein the glass differs from his eye," and to refuse to believe "that the blood consists partly of red particles and partly of limpid liquor because it all appears red to the naked eye" (Edwards 1968: 227). It would be equally absurd to reject truths that can be established by a reason that employs the rule "memories are generally reliable" on the grounds that memory reports cannot be independently established by a reason that does not employ that rule. Jonathan Edwards argues that it is equally unreasonable to discount what can be discovered by a reason that employs the rule that scripture is credible on the grounds that truths learned in this way cannot be established by a reason that rejects it.

Deists will, of course, respond that they have good reasons for *rejecting* the authority of scripture and hence the rule in question. A large part of their reason for doing so, however, is the alleged absurdity of its teachings (about God's triunity, incarnation, and the like). But because this absurdity is established by assessing the truth of the propositions in question without employing the relevant epistemic tool (scripture) or rule ("Consult scripture") which their Christian opponents claim is needed to correctly do so, their method of proceeding begs the question.

A second deistic response isn't open to this objection, however. The goodness of the optic glass is established by the naked eye, and hence without using it. By contrast, it is doubtful that the authority of scripture can be established without appealing to it. Of course, Edwards and many other seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Christians thought that it could. In their view scripture's authority is certified by miracles, fulfilled prophecies, the harmony between revealed and natural religion, scripture's beneficial effects on morality, and so on—that is, on things they believed could be established by naked reason. Considerations of this sort lost a good deal of their persuasiveness in the following centuries, however, and no longer seem convincing even to many Christians. It is therefore important to note that Edwards himself thought that considerations of this kind were often insufficient in practice. The *strongest* evidence for scripture's divine authority, in his opinion, is its spiritual beauty—a feature that cannot be detected by unaided natural faculties. Only those with converted hearts can "perceive," "taste," and "relish" the stamp of divine splendor on scripture and thus be *certain* of its teachings. Both Aquinas and Calvin said something similar. (See Aquinas 1947: part II, question 6, article 1; and Aquinas 1953, question 14, article 1. See also Calvin 1957, book 1, chapter 7, section 4.) In the view of all three, what is too often lacking in assessing the credentials of scripture or the truth of other existentially significant claims is not adequate evidence for them but the dispositions needed to read that evidence correctly. And this takes us to one of the most fundamental issues dividing classical deists and their modern followers, on the one hand, from traditional Christians and the adherents of other religious traditions, on the other.

(4) Most Christian theologians have assumed that reason can establish many important truths about God and what he demands of us. The reason in question must be what seventeenth-century English Christians called "right reason," however. For example, Cambridge Platonists such as John Smith claimed that reason is "a light flowing from the foundation and father of lights," given "to enable man to work out of himself all those notions of God which are the true ground-work of love and obedience to God, and conformity to him" (Smith 1978 [1660]: 382). Their exaltation of reason was not unqualified, however. Because of the fall, reason is "but an old MS., with some broken periods, some letters worn out," a picture "which has lost its gloss and beauty, the orieny of its colours, . . . the comeliness of its proportions" (Powicke 1970 [1926]: 30). As a consequence, divine assistance is now needed and God has provided it. Not only is there "an outward revelation of God's will to man [scripture], there is an inward impression of it on their minds and spirits . . . we cannot see divine things but in a divine light" (Smith 1978 [1660]: 384). Henry More spoke for all of the Cambridge Platonists when he said: "The oracle of God [reason] is not to be heard but in his holy temple—that is to say in a good and holy man, thoroughly sanctified in spirit, soul, and body" (More 1978 [1662]: viii). What is needed, in short, is a proper orientation of one's hopes and fears, desires and affections, feelings and emotions, in other words, of one's affective or willing nature.

The deist's conception of sound reason, on the other hand, excludes what Pascal called "reasons of the heart" and William James referred to as the promptings of our "passional nature." Reason in their view is only "objective" or "truth oriented" when it is unaffected by our wants, interests, sentiments, and desires. Note, however, that a restriction of this sort is utterly implausible when applied to reasoning about ethics or other value-laden matters. Aristotle, for example, thought that the first premises of moral reasoning are general propositions about what is good for people in general, or for certain kinds of people, or for people in certain circumstances. General propositions of this sort are partial articulations of the good life. Men and women whose emotional and desiring natures have been warped by training or circumstance will have a perverted sense of the good (identifying it with the life of pleasure, say, or the life of worldly honor). They have (as Plato said) "a lie in their soul" and are therefore incapable of reasoning correctly about ethical matters. A properly cultivated emotional and desiring nature is thus essential to sound ethical reasoning. Now, classical Christian theism identified God with Goodness itself. If the identification is correct, it follows that the proper feelings and dispositions are necessary to reason properly about *him*. And more generally because *all* comprehensive world-views integrally incorporate values and because values can't be properly grasped in the absence of the right feelings and emotions, appropriate dispositions of the heart will be needed to discern the truth of *any* world-view, including the Christian world-view (for more on this important point see Wainwright 1995). If this is right, though, then by insisting on their ideal of "objectivity," deists deprive themselves of one of the most essential tools for properly evaluating it.

Bare Theism's Religious Inadequacy

From the point of view of Christianity, bare theism also seems *religiously* inadequate. For example, it might do a poorer job of handling the problem of evil. The quantity and kinds of evil that exist are not what we would antecedently expect given the hypothesis of bare theism alone. Indeed the antecedent probability of existing evils on the deistic hypothesis would seem to be either low or inscrutable. (Inscrutable if, given God's transcendence and our limitations, it is highly unlikely that we would know God's reasons for permitting many of the evils we encounter even if he had good reasons for permitting them.) By contrast, great evils are not only probable on the Christian hypothesis, they are certain. For the Christian hypothesis includes the atonement and redemption, and the atonement and redemption entail horrendous sin and suffering. In short, evil would seem to be less of a problem for Christian theism than for bare theism since the former includes a great good that entails it and the latter does not.

Of course it is also true that the antecedent probability of Christianity is lower than the antecedent probability of bare theism since it is more complex or includes more. As we saw earlier, though, the probability of Christian theism on the *total* evidence (including evil) might still be higher than the probability of *bare* theism (that is, of theism *alone* without Christian or Muslim or Hindu embellishments). Moreover, Christian theism could also provide resources for making existential sense of the evils we experience which aren't available to deists. Marilyn Adams, for example, has argued that Christian theodiscists should explore the implications of such goods as Christian martyrdom and Christ's passion. Suffering could be a means of participating in Christ, thereby providing the sufferer with insight into, and communion with, God's own inner life (see Adams 1999).

Another reason for doubting deism's religious adequacy is the suspicion that it fails an important existential test. To be adequate a comprehensive religious or other world-view must not only meet formal criteria and possess explanatory power, it should also satisfy a pragmatic criterion. Paul Tillich thought that philosophical theories should be partly judged by "their efficacy in the life-process of mankind" (Tillich 1951: 105). According to Frederick Ferre, a comprehensive metaphysical system is adequate only "if it is capable of 'coming to life' for individuals," enabling them to cope with their "total environment." It must have a "capacity for ringing true with respect to" those who use it, enabling them to "cope successfully with the challenges of life" (Ferre and Bendall 1963: 171). William James makes a similar point: metaphysical schemes must meet practical as well as intellectual demands.

The question is, does deism do so, in other words, can one obtain the good religion promises, "if good there be," by embracing bare theism or some other alleged religious common denominator, while rejecting, or suspending judgment about, the points on which religions differ? Not clearly. Consider James' generic religious hypothesis, for example: Religion's first affirmation is that

[T]he best things are the more eternal things, . . . the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the final word. . . . The second affirmation of religion is that we are better off even now if we believe her first affirmation to be true.

(James 1956: 25–6)

Religious hypotheses like these are, arguably, too thin to guide life or to provide it with depth and meaning. In order to *embrace* or *existentially appropriate* one of these hypotheses by living in accordance with it and shaping one's life by it, one must adopt it in some concrete form or other. One strongly suspects that men and women who practice their religion but believe they are only embracing abstract or generic religious hypotheses such as bare theism, unwittingly flesh them out with currently fashionable opinions, private philosophical speculations, and their own imaginative constructs, that is, their theism is, in fact, not "bare" at all. And one could reasonably wonder whether "do it yourself" versions of religion like these with their own private embellishments are as likely to be true as those forms of religion that have stood the test of time and satisfied the intellectual and existential demands of countless thousands. (There are degrees here. The beliefs of many professed deists seem to have little visible impact on their lives and actions—and the same is, of course, true of many professed Christians. Except for the difference in professed beliefs, the intellectual, affective, and moral lives of deists such as Thomas Jefferson or Thomas Paine seem no different from those of contemporary agnostics and atheists such as David Hume and Denis Diderot. Where deism has been institutionalized as in the case of nineteenth-century New England Unitarians, the differences between deism and more longstanding religious traditions is less sharp.)

Bare Theism and Idolatry

A potentially even deeper problem might be this. The seventeenth-century Puritan divine, John Owen, conceded that when functioning at its best, natural reason can arrive at the knowledge of "the goodness, the amiableness, . . . the all sufficient satisfactoriness of the infinite perfections of the divine nature," and at the conviction that

human blessedness consists “in the soul’s full satisfaction in the goodness and beauty of” that nature. “Scripture gives us another notion of heaven and glory,” however, “not contrary unto [that of the philosophers, nor] inconsistent with it, but more suited unto the faith and experience of believers” and to God’s gracious dispensation. “The infinite incomprehensible excellencies of the divine nature” that the philosophers speak of “are not proposed in scripture as the immediate object of our faith here,” nor of our “sight in heaven.” That object is rather “the manifestation of the glory of the infinite wisdom, grace, love, kindness and power of God in Christ.” A person who is unacquainted with the glory of God in Christ can’t have “any other heaven in his aim but what is erected in his own [febrile] imagination,” and is thus an idol (Owen 1681: 102–5).

Owen’s comments are expressions of a strand in Christianity which while by no means dominant goes back at least as far as Tertullian (155–222) who rhetorically asked:

What . . . has Athens to do with Jerusalem? The Academy [of the philosophers] and the Church? . . . Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition. We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ, no [philosophical] inquisition after enjoying the Gospel.

(Roberts and Donaldson 1950: 246)

The most prominent modern representative of this strand in Christian thought is the Swiss theologian, Karl Barth.

In an essay entitled “The First Commandment as an Axiom for Theology” Barth (1986) urges us to be cautious in attempting to supplement revelation by adding independent sources of knowledge of God. If we do choose to do so, however, we should be very careful to speak of revelation “with heightened seriousness and interest,” and to speak of the other source (such as natural reason) “only secondarily and for the sake of revelation.” Obedience to the first commandment also requires that we interpret “those other things according to revelation and not the other way around.” For example, even if natural reason can show that God is all powerful, his power must be interpreted in the light of revelation, that is, by what God has done and has promised to do, not by abstract philosophical ideas of omnipotence.

To disregard the way [biblical] narratives determine one’s understanding of the properties of God is to engage in a study of something other than the “reality of God” . . . When Barth . . . endeavors to describe the divine attributes he [therefore] allows select scriptural stories of what God has done, especially in the narrative of what he has done [in] Jesus Christ, to determine [the meaning of] his use of terms.

(Krieg 1977: 199)

And, finally, theology must permit “no possibility . . . of intermixing, exchanging, or identifying the two concepts,” by identifying revelation with human reason, for example, as the deists did, or by equating it with the reflections of human religious “genius” in the manner of the liberal theologian, C. H. Dodd (Barth 1986: 73–5). (Dodd argues that the authority of the prophets and saints who speak through scripture is the authority “which belongs intrinsically to genius.” It is based on an experience of divine reality that is “fuller, deeper and more compelling than” ours. While

the insights of these “geniuses” contain much truth they are nonetheless mixed with error. Their insights provide “stimulus, support and direction” but they are refracted through the historically conditioned and morally imperfect personalities of their authors. We should therefore not “submit to them blindly, or expect them to be infallible” (Dodd 1978: chapter 1.)

T. F. Torrance thinks that in the final analysis, natural theology is not so much denied by Barth as “undermined, relativized and set aside by the actual knowledge of God mediated through Christ. Just as when we are justified by the grace of God in Jesus Christ . . . our natural goodness” is not denied but “set aside,” since “we are saved by grace and not by our own works of righteousness, . . . so here . . . our natural knowledge [of God] is set aside, for we know God through his own grace and not by our own efforts of reason without there being any denial of the existence of natural knowledge” of God (Torrance 1970: 126). But while this isn’t entirely wrong, it is misleading. For though natural knowledge of God exists, it can be a trap leading to both intellectual and spiritual error.

Torrance himself admits that, for Barth, natural theology

exists in *opposition* to the actual knowledge of God mediated through his word and . . . must therefore be called in question by it as illegitimate and *invalid* in so far as it claims to be knowledge of God as he really is . . . The fact that God himself had to become man in order to break a way through our estrangement and darkness . . . not only precludes us from entertaining other possibilities of a way from man to God but actually *invalidates* them all.

(Torrance 1970: 125–6)

Why is this the case?

In the first place it is because natural theology is an expression of a sinful desire for autonomy, an attempt to establish a relation to God on our own terms. The natural theologian “works out the knowledge of God that is possible” independent of “God’s revelation in Jesus Christ.” This is a “necessary [i.e., inevitable] undertaking in the sphere of man as such”—a sphere that “arises and exists in the fact that” instead of relying on God, “man depends on himself over against God. But this means that, in actual fact, God becomes unknowable to man, and he makes himself equal to God. For the man who refuses his grace [by relying on himself] God becomes the substance of the highest that he can see, choose, create, and be” and, as such, is implicitly identified with himself at his best or most idealized. “It is of this [idol or simulacrum] that he gives an account in natural theology.” Natural theology is thus “the attempted replacement of the divine work by a human manufacture. The divine reality offered and manifested to us in revelation is replaced by a concept of God arbitrarily and willfully evolved by man” (Barth 1961: 51–2). Brian Leftow puts Barth’s point this way:

Christianity claims that human beings are [properly] related to God only through God’s grace (i.e., through unmerited divine action). As Barth sees it, a successful proof of God’s existence [or attributes] would be a human work, not an act of divine grace, and a human work establishing from our side a [proper] relation to God . . . To seek a theistic proof is to seek a relationship with God not founded on grace . . . [and] therefore to reject the grace God offers.

(Leftow 1995: 66)

Leftow also suggests that Barth might have thought that beliefs that appear to be generated by natural theology are, in fact, generated by wishful thinking or self-deception and, ultimately, by self-love. Thus while the conclusions of natural theology *seem* true to us, they do so largely because we *want* them to be true, and we want them to be true because they flatter our self-love, presenting us with the God we would like rather than the one revealed in the Bible. Yet if this is the case, beliefs produced by natural theology are formed by processes that are not aimed at truth. We have no reason, then, to believe that those processes are reliable, and hence no reason to think that the beliefs they generate are true (Leftow 1995: 54–61). It is, perhaps, for this reason among others that Barth thought that natural theology neither can nor “should be combated on its own ground [i.e., by philosophical reason], for as soon as one attempts to do that one has thereby conceded the ground on which it rests, namely the autonomous existence of estranged and sinful man . . . From this point of view the danger of natural theology lies in the fact that once its ground has been conceded it becomes the ground on which everything is absorbed . . . naturalized” and “domesticated,” including “the knowledge of God mediated through his self-revelation in Christ” (Torrance 1970: 125–6).

There are a number of problems with Barth’s position. For one thing, both Anselm and Aquinas use natural theology as “a means independent of and laying the foundations for the Word of God” (Padgett 2004: 499). Are they therefore *idolatrous*, confusing the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob with the God of the philosophers? Almost certainly not. Note that Barth himself did not think so (see Barth 1960). That they identify the two doesn’t entail that they confuse them. I *identify* Barack Obama and the current president of the United States, for example. I don’t confuse them (but more on this below).

Nor is the practice of natural theology incompatible with a total reliance on God’s grace, for “the execution of a theistic proof [might] depend on gracious divine help and . . . the prover [might] acknowledge this” (Leftow 1995: 66). Anselm is a case in point. His *Proslogion* is punctuated with prayers for divine assistance and thanksgivings for the light he has received.

Moreover, God might have a salvific use for natural theology. As Leftow argues, “if God wants personal communion with his creatures, he would increase his chance of achieving this by creating creatures with a natural desire for communion with him,” and the acquisition of some natural knowledge of God might be an effective means “to enflame [this] desire.” Then, too, “desire for God is a form of love for God” (my emphasis), and “some who are not believers . . . may pursue natural theology from” this desire even though they “do not yet know him personally,” that is, have not yet had a loving encounter with him. That they do not yet accept grace does not entail that they reject it (Leftow 1995: 67–8).

Finally, “a *believer’s* pursuit of natural theology [may] arise precisely from [his or her] love of God” (Leftow 1995: 68, my emphasis). It does so because lovers delight in learning more and more about the object of their love. This presupposes of course what Barth denies, namely, that the object of the Christian’s love is the object of natural theology. Note that Leftow himself adduces rather different reasons for a believer’s pursuing natural theology, namely, a desire to defend the person one loves from the calumnies of atheists and agnostics or to express one’s love of, and delight in, the truth by displaying “how powerful the evidence is that shows that it is the truth” (Leftow 1995: 68). While I do not deny that believers might legitimately pursue natural theology for those reasons, I think that the one I have adduced is more central.

These points are well taken. Even so, that the pursuit of natural theology *can* be combined with Christian faith doesn't entail that it always (or even usually?) is combined with it, or that it doesn't often tempt its practitioners to *replace* the God of faith with the God of the philosophers. Note that a description of someone can be misleading, present a false picture, even if every statement included in that description is true. It can do this by omitting important truths, including truths which would modify the contextual implications of truths which *are* included in the description if they too were included in it. The deistic picture of God is arguably false or misleading (idolatrous) in just this way. By omitting to mention that God exhibits his power chiefly in showing pity and mercy, for example, by making it easy to construe God's goodness as utility maximization, and especially by refusing to recognize that God's glory is primarily revealed "in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6), the Christian believes that the deist's portrait of God as the God of bare theism is an impoverished and potentially misleading simulacrum of the real thing.

Yet how can this be if Christian theism entails theism, and "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" and "the God of the philosophers" refer to the same thing? The answer, I believe, is this.

Although Christianity *entails* theism, it modifies theism's contextual and pragmatic meaning. Deists identify a rational faith with (an existentially appropriated?) belief in bare theism. In their view, Christian doctrines such as the Incarnation or Trinity are irrational, or at least non-rational, accretions which have been tacked onto it by priest craft, superstition, and the like.

But this is misleading at best. In the first place, the deist's claim is historically false. Humans don't *begin* with bare theism and then add things to it. Far from Christianity and other revealed religions being parasitic upon a primitive deism which they overlay with their absurdities, the converse is closer to the truth. Deism didn't arise spontaneously but only in reaction to the alleged absurdities and irrationalities of revealed religion in general and Christianity in particular. Historically, at least, deism is parasitic on Christianity, not Christianity on deism.

More importantly, in living theistic religions such as Christianity, theses of bare theism such as God's omnipotence or perfect goodness are intimately interwoven with other theses which, by articulating them, help to determine the meaning they have for the tradition in question. Christians articulate the doctrine of God's goodness, for example, by deploying the Christian story of redemption and, in so doing, inflect or qualify its meaning. Christianity's insistence on God's mystery provides another example of the way in which its doctrines can inflect the theses of bare theism. Thus if God is simple and/or his essence can't be grasped, then the only literally true statements we can make about him are negations and analogies (that is, statements of the form *God has a property, P, which is related to him as, for example, power or knowledge are related to us, or God has a property, P, which is more perfect than, and the causal ground of, for example, creaturely power or knowledge*). But in that case God's power or knowledge or goodness, for example, have a dimension or depth which exceeds our conceptual grasp, and taking this into account affects those concepts' wider meanings.

Attacks on theism whose ultimate target is Christianity or some other revealed religion can misfire because by focusing on bare theism they mistake a fragment for the whole or an abstraction for the rich reality from which that abstraction is drawn. An attack on God's goodness which ignores the Christian's understanding of that goodness, for instance, can be largely beside the point. I do not mean to suggest that *all* agnostic or

atheistic arguments against, for example, God's goodness make this mistake. I do mean to suggest that too many of them do so.

Problems for Christian Theism

I have argued that Christianity is in an epistemically and existentially better position than bare theism in many respects. It is by no means off the hook, however. If theism in general is false, as atheists believe, then so too is Christian theism. Furthermore, Christians need to defend doctrines such as the Trinity and the Incarnation against the charge of absurdity. Finally, because other forms of enriched theism such as Shri Vaishnavism or Sufism might be able to construct similar (although not identical) responses to deism, it is incumbent on Christians to explain why *their* form of enriched theism is superior to those of their rivals.

Related Topics

Chapter 1: Western Philosophy; Chapter 13: Evidence; Chapter 28: Arguments from Evil; Chapter 49: History and Experience

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5

ISLAM

Oliver Leaman

The Qur'an

Proofs of the existence of God abound in Islam, and they can be seen already in the Qur'an. The Qur'an sees itself as a profoundly rational work, calling on its readers to think, reflect and consider, and it consists of many passages that it regards as demonstrating, in a sense, religious truths. The most significant of these truths of course is that there is a God who created the world, and it is claimed that we can work this out for ourselves by looking at that world. The argument here is mainly rhetorical, inviting us to look at nature and then consider how it came about. The answer that is elicited is that God created the world. In the modern Islamic world, such informal arguments have retained the popularity they enjoyed in former times. It is important to note at this stage that the more demonstrative proofs that did arise within Islamic philosophy and theology were often linked with scriptural passages not only to vouch for their religious orthodoxy but also to acknowledge the significance of understanding divine existence as more than just the conclusion of an argument. Recently there has arisen a sort of popular Islam in the works of predominantly Turkish thinkers who seek to oppose the secularism of the modern world by producing highly simplistic arguments in favor of the existence of God. While their arguments hark back to the Qur'an, they really do not represent it adequately.

There are some definite arguments in the Qur'an for the existence of God and, in particular, for the existence of just one God. At 21.22 (quotations from the Qur'an will be given in this form—sura.aya, chapter.verse) we are told that if there were more than one God, the heavens and earth would be confused, presumably because the different gods would all be doing different and uncoordinated things. 6.75–78 provides an account of Abraham's reflections when he watches the planets and thinks they are variously in charge of the world, revising his beliefs all the time as their lights wax and wane. Even the sun proves to be insufficient, and Abraham concludes that it cannot be the cause of the world, for the cause cannot be something that is associated with other physical things but must be some being that is behind everything that happens. This leads him to monotheism, and the particular type of monotheism put forward in the Qur'an.

Formal Arguments for the Existence of God

A variety of types of argument for the existence of God are found in Islamic thought. Many of the arguments that were current in Greek philosophy were imported into the Islamic world when Greek culture became a topic of great interest within the expanding

Islamic empire, and many basic texts were translated and discussed. Some of the intellectuals in the early Islamic world were Christians who used in their theological work a range of proofs from Greek thought, and hardly surprisingly, these proofs also aroused a lot of interest among Muslims (Davidson 1987).

The most common proof is some version of the cosmological argument, which basically stipulates that the existence of the world can be traced back to an ultimate cause, and this tracing back cannot proceed indefinitely and must stop at a “first cause,” God the creator. Another proof can be broadly called ontological, for the argument is that since the greatest being that can be conceived is in our minds, either it exists only in thought or also in reality, but since existence in reality and in thought is superior to existence only in thought, this “greatest being” must exist in thought and also in reality. Then, as noted already, there are arguments broadly from design, which fit in nicely with the Qur’an, which instructs us to observe all the glorious complexity and harmony of creation and conclude that a supremely powerful and intelligent creator is behind it. Finally there are proofs that are based on personal spiritual experience. In the following sections I review some of these proofs and display the most common forms that these arguments took within Islamic thought. I begin with the ontological proof as that is the most abstract.

The Ontological Proof

One of the most fertile sources of proofs for the existence of God is Ibn Sina or Avicenna (d. 1037) who created a rich ontological vocabulary based on the pioneering work of al-Farabi (death c.950). Ibn Sina’s proofs for the existence of God have been the topic of much discussion, especially within Persian philosophy. He distinguished between two kinds of existence, the necessary and the merely possible, and he noted that something that is merely possible requires something else to bring it into actual existence. Were that not the case it would remain forever possible, and so not really be possible at all, since, according to Ibn Sina, “possible” means something that not only could occur, but will eventually occur (Leaman 2002).

These fairly brief remarks by Ibn Sina in the *Metaphysics* section of his *al-Shifa* have become the source of much development, and Tusi (d. 1274) distinguishes between three sorts of argument that can be derived from them: the *kalam* cosmological argument, the proof from motion that derives from Aristotle’s *Physics*, and an ontological argument. The last argument has the highest status and Ibn Sina himself calls it the *burhan al-siddiqin*, the proof of the veracious (Mayer 2001). Mulla Sadra (d. 1641) develops the argument into what he calls the “way of the veracious” (*sabil al-siddiqin*). What he means by *siddiq* is not the same as what Ibn Sina meant and the gap in meaning is a good illustration of the difference in their philosophical method. For Mulla Sadra, the *siddiq* is one who possesses inner religious experience that is attained through grace and spiritual exercise. In the exegesis of 57.19 on the phrase “those who believe in God and His messengers are the veracious ones and witness before their Lord,” he argues that the *siddiq* is characterized by witnessing the truth through inner revelation. This is not just an intellectual achievement but represents the result of inner mystical revelation (*kashf*) and the overcoming of the body and its influence on us. Ibn Sina’s argument was thought to be insufficient in part because Mulla Sadra disapproved of his prioritizing essence over existence. Mulla Sadra saw this as avoiding the concrete reality of being and remaining stuck in the realm of ideas. Existence is a concrete reality that is

simple and unique and there is no essential distinction among its individuals except in terms of degrees of perfection and imperfection and intensity and debilitation.

Journey III of the *Four Journeys* begins with a discussion of the ways of proving the existence of God. Having discussed previous cosmological and ontological proofs, Mulla Sadra expresses his own “method of the veracious” (*manhaj al-siddiqin*) by distinguishing between the pure reality of Necessary Being and the lesser reality of beings that enjoy less perfect levels of existence (Rizvi 2009). The proof begins with the concepts of existence and of God and ends with the reality of the latter. Given Mulla Sadra’s enthusiasm for the role of existence, this is entirely appropriate. It seems to be a type of ontological proof, and so raises the suspicion that it might be tautological. Even Mulla Sadra is not that happy with it, and he argues that the reality of existence is so rich that it eludes human ability to confine it to discourse through description, and it is not surprising that he calls it a *manhaj al-siddiqin* or method for those concerned with the truth and not, strictly speaking, a demonstrative proof itself. It is well understood in contemporary Islamic theology that Mulla Sadra does not provide a demonstration because, in effect, all successful proofs for the existence of God must begin with God’s effects and deduce his existence as the cause of those effects. Proofs for the existence of God, therefore, are not thought to be attempts at producing demonstrations based on abstract reasoning but are mere reminders of what we already know through experience and observation and so merely confirm what information we already possess. One immediate deduction from our experience is that things are contingent and arguments from contingency have been popular within Islamic thought.

Arguments from Contingency

In Islamic theology two types of argument from contingency have been influential: the argument from particularization (*takhsis*) and the tipping the scales (*tarjih*) argument. Al-Juwayni (d. 1085) provides a good example of the former, when he argues that since the world could have been created at any time at all, the fact that it was created at a particular time and in a particular way demonstrates that someone must have made the decision to create it thus. This form of argument is based, no doubt, on Ibn Sina’s notion of contingency, whereby something is always needed to bring the possibly existent into actual existence. This cause must eventually be identified with a necessary existent, something that can bring the line of causes and effects to an end.

Nonetheless, Ibn Sina himself would not have accepted that the proof shows that the world was created in time, something for which he was attacked later on by al-Ghazali (d. 1111 CE). For Ibn Sina the world could not be created in time since that would presuppose an infinite regress of causes of creation. Bringing in the second argument from contingency, al-Ghazali rejected Ibn Sina’s position in favor of the view that since any moment of time before the existence of the world is indistinguishable from any other, there must be an agent who tips the scales (*tarjih*) in favor of a particular time and creates the world then (Al-Ghazali 1998; Leaman 2009: 24–6). A variation of this theme can be found in Ibn al-Arabi who uses the Qur’anic notion of the *barzakh* (25.53), or limit, to explain how things can be composed of two different sorts of entities, which would normally be expected to be incompatible.

As so often Ibn Rushd (Averroes d. 1198) tries to get back to Aristotle in his proof for the existence of God. He argues that there must be a first cause to avoid the implication of an infinite regress of causes (Genequand 1984). Apart from the first cause, every

other cause is also an effect in a long and complex series. The first cause is required as the source of the series to get it going, as it were. It is not required to be in the series itself except as its ultimate starting point. This brings us to a form of the cosmological argument that has recently received a lot of attention.

The Kalam Cosmological Argument

The kalam cosmological argument has recently been revived in the Anglo-American philosophical sphere by William Lane Craig. Its crucial starting point is that the world is finite. In its modern form, the argument can be roughly schematized as follows:

- (1) Everything that has a beginning of its existence has a cause of its existence.
- (2) The universe has a beginning of its existence.

Therefore:

- (3) The universe has a cause of its existence.
- (4) If the universe has a cause of its existence then that cause is God.

Therefore:

- (5) God exists.

What makes the title of this argument very appropriate is the fact that it does accurately represent the ways in which many of the philosophers in the Islamic world strenuously challenged the widely accepted Aristotelian thesis, endorsed by Ibn Sina, that the world has no beginning and so is infinite. Proponents of the modern argument are particularly interested in theories of the creation of the universe such as Big Bang theory which do indeed suggest that the universe had a start at some point, which of course also fits in nicely with the theistic principle embedded in most understandings of the Qur'an (Craig 1979).

We now turn to consider the next set of arguments, which have also appealed to modern philosophical sensibilities.

Teleological Arguments/Arguments from Design

The teleological/design argument has also been proposed by a number of classical Muslim thinkers who see it as following the various scriptural passages that point to a purpose that God has in creating the world, such as: "Not for [idle] sport did We create the heavens and the earth and all that is between" (21.16). Probably the earliest version of the argument goes back to al-Kindi (d. 873) who suggested that the orderly and wonderful phenomena of nature could not be purposeless and accidental. Al-Baqillani (d. 1013) expressed the argument thus: the world must have a Maker and a Fashioner (*muhdith wa musawwir*) just as writing must have a writer, a picture must have a painter, and a building a builder. In his short *Decisive Treatise*, Ibn Rushd begins his demonstration of the lawfulness of doing philosophy in Islam for those who are capable of it, by defining philosophy as the discovery of the meaning of the world in terms of where it is going and who set it in motion. In his *Kashf* he refers to the order of creation as providing evidence of the existence of a creator (Ibn Rushd 1976). It is the order of creation that establishes the need for a creator and so rules out the suggestion that it could have

come about through natural processes alone. The argument is that the organization of the world reveals the existence of a creator who decided it should take that shape, and it is not possible for the world to have come about through any other process. Ibn Rushd's difference from the theologians is that while they tend to argue from the principle that nature is constructed by someone outside nature, he goes further and argues that the more one understands the structure of the natural world, the more certain one can be that it originates with a creator. The philosopher then not only understands the world but also understands its links with God better than the theologian. The latter really only establishes a link between the world and a creator, without really understanding the nature of that link because he does not really understand much about the order of the natural world.

Ibn Rushd has a point in that a theological group called the Ash'arites were so concerned to emphasize the power of God over everything that happens that they downplayed the organization of nature, since they regarded that as the arbitrary result of whatever God does. It is not as though for them God has to create the world in a particular way, for our benefit for example. On the contrary, God could have created it in any way he wanted to, so for them it is just the fact of creation that points to a creator, as al-Baqillani suggests. Yet Ibn Rushd proposes, with some justification, that pointing to the organization of creation and to its apparent providence, works as an argument both for the public at large and for those who are able, through their understanding of natural science, to appreciate the finer details of creation. That is why the pursuit of philosophy is lawful in Islam; it helps us elucidate the nature of the world, and that inevitably leads to the thought of the creator, and so the practice of philosophy accords well with the principles of religion.

In more popular forms of Islam today the emphasis on design is firmly linked with the idea of a designer, and arguments for design that involve evolution tend to be strenuously rejected. The trouble with evolution is that it appears to be a mechanism that operates without being directed by anyone in particular, and the idea that God is the source of the mechanism is rejected because it does not give God enough to do in the creation and direction of the world. The Qur'an is full of references to how God has organized the world, and these could be taken to be indicating that he is, in the end, behind the design that comes about, or we could follow the principles of the chief theological school in Sunni Islam, Ash'arism, according to which God is *directly* responsible for everything that happens. Many Muslims take the latter course holding that evolutionary theory is ruled out because it is incompatible with God's role in the creation of the world.

The Divine Attributes and the Unity of God

In addition to their interest in arguments for the existence of God, the early Islamic theologians were concerned with a number of issues relating to God. They were especially exercised by the attempt to reconcile the rather anthropomorphic language used about God in the Qur'an and the insistence in Islam on the unity of God and his distinctness from anything human or animal. Their Book refers to God sitting on a throne and so on, and this gives rise to familiar problems in reconciling physical imagery with a non-physical subject. The God of Islam is taken to be one and this is repeated several times a day in the prayers, in the phrase "there is no God except God and Muhammad is his messenger." Although the Arabic term *Allah* has no plurals, this is not so of the term

from which it is derived, *al-ilah*. That latter term refers to deities, and in pre-Islamic Arabia there were many religions that believed in gods, and also some that believed in just one God. In pre-Islamic Mecca the Ka'ba site was the home of both the gods and God himself, and the main and obvious difference between them seems to have been that God was not represented physically while the gods were. The gods were presumably not difficult to describe since they were physically there in front of their worshippers. The God of Islam is more mysterious. Since he is immaterial theologians are constantly warning Muslims not to try to define him, but rather to seek to understand him through concentrating on his effects. One of the approved paths to thinking about him is meditation on his names, of which there are often taken to be ninety-nine, although this number is not actually mentioned in the Qur'an. There is a passage at 59.22–4 which mentions around fifteen names but some argue that a careful analysis of the Qur'an will yield ninety-nine (Leaman 2006a: 457–60) and yet more names (7.180, 17.110, 20.8). Presumably the *jahili* or pre-Islamic theology of the Meccans was not so developed, but from what we are told in the Qur'an there seems to have been general acceptance that it is God himself who rules and organizes everything (10.31, 39.38). Even when polluted by polytheism the Ka'ba was regarded as significant by the Qur'an, and the attack with an elephant of the Ethiopian king Abraha, a Christian ruler, was defeated by divine intervention through flying insects (105.1–2). Suras 105 and 106 speak with some respect of the ceremonies and people connected to the structure, even though they were not at all monotheistic, perhaps recalling the origins of the building at the time of Abraham and Ishmael. The Qur'an fiercely rejects the idea that the gods are required to act as mediators between humanity and God himself (10.18), an idea which comes to be classified as *shirk* or idolatry, quite appropriately, and to interfere with the transcendence of the one God. On the other hand, there are some fairly approving references in the Qur'an to lesser beings, which may be believed in provided that they are regarded firmly as God's creatures and not independent of him or, indeed, as providing independent channels to him.

Further inquiry into the nature of God quickly became popular in Islamic culture, helped by the setting up of colleges and a vast translation project of existing knowledge from the ancient Greek world. The discipline of *kalam* or theology became well established to answer the traditional questions about God and his qualities. Some argued that the divine attributes were themselves created by God, so as not to interfere with divine unity, while others proposed that they really coexisted with him. Some suggested that the Qur'an was created by him, as he was its author, while others—in what turned out to be the more popular view—took the line that it was eternal. This led to protracted debates on whether God controlled everything in the world, or whether there was some scope for human freedom, and also on whether God was obliged to do what is good and right, and act in our interests, or whether whatever he does is classified, for the very reason that he does it, as good and right. No exterior principles of morality can be regarded as governing his actions, since this would be to detract from his perfection and omnipotence, the Ash'arites argued, and their view prevailed, as did their suggestion that really God controls everything that happens in the world and the only reason it does not seem to be thus is because we appear to be responsible for what He does. This interpretation fits in nicely with the stress in the earlier verses of the Qur'an of divine *rububiyya* (sovereignty) and absolute rule. Divine knowledge extends to every leaf that falls (6.59) and the conception of every woman (35.11). One of the constant themes of the Qur'an is the significance of the afterlife and our punishment and/or reward there, and God's role

in distinguishing between who deserves to go where. A range of attributes is mentioned which mean that we must both fear God and hope for his forgiveness, expect to be tested by him and also hope to receive his mercy.

Many of the early Islamic thinkers were sensitive to the difficulty that the divine attributes can only really be grasped through our limited human conceptions and this inevitably gives us an imperfect understanding which contrasts unfavorably with the perfect way in which they are exemplified in the deity itself. There is thus a danger in concentrating on his attributes in that it might encourage some to identify God with someone or something else, the great sin of Islam, *shirk* or idolatry, and the opposite of *tawhid*, or divine unity. One way in which they tried to mitigate this problem was by focusing on the notion of divine names.

The two names that are frequently applied to God are *al-rahman* and *al-rahim* (the compassionate, the merciful), and these might be taken to be his outstanding characteristics that control many of the others. At one stage it is likely that the Arabs found the use of the name *al-rahman* confusing, wondering how it connected up with their conception of Allah, since we find in the Qur'an at 17.110 "Pray to Allah or pray to *al-Rahman*, whichever you call upon, to him belong the beautiful names." Muslims frequently invoke the name of God in a formula before initiating action or just in reacting to news and greeting others. Every sura except one starts with the phrase "In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate."

Is the God of Islam also the God of Christianity and Judaism?

Perhaps one of the innovations that Islam makes is to identify Allah, the God of the Quraysh, Muhammad's tribe and the controllers of the lucrative Meccan pilgrimage business, with the God of Judaism and Christianity, and so linking Allah with the God of Abraham, Moses and Jesus. Indeed, it is popular nowadays in writing and thinking about religions to emphasize the links between them, and also the principles they hold in common.

So, for example, right now in the second decade of the second millennium an organization called Common Ground seeks to represent what Muslims and Christians agree on. Also, in 2000 an organization called *Dabru Emet* was set up to explore what views Jews and Christians share. The point of these organizations is to highlight that about which the Abrahamic religions are not in conflict, in the hope that this might foster amicable relations between their followers and affect a decrease in the violence that has almost always characterized their encounters. The very fact that we call each of these religions Abrahamic suggests to some that they must share things in common, at least in all respecting Abraham.

I am not going to be looking at this strategy further here but, rather, at one of its intellectual underpinnings: the apparent fact that the different religions often present accounts of the same historical characters. Before I move onto this though it is worth expressing a degree of skepticism about the positive results of actually discovering that the different religions agree on many principles and details. One of the facts of religious sociology is that the most bitter violence often arises through minor disagreements and technical differences, and that conflict within a single religion is often more protracted than that between quite distinct religions. The more similar the views of believers, the more they might find whatever remains distinct to be crucial to their relations with each other.

The Qur'anic view about the Abrahamic religions is that Islam is the *din al-fitrah*, the original religion, in that before its final revelation by the Prophet Muhammad it was revealed by earlier prophets such as Moses and Jesus. Unfortunately, though their original message was the authentic word of God, it was interpreted in wrong ways by their communities, and subjected to *tahrif* 2.75, 4.46, 5.13, *tabdil* 2.59, 7.162 and *talbis* 2.42, 3.71, corruption, adulteration and alteration. This explains why for instance Jesus is represented as having been crucified in the Gospel, as the Qur'an refers to the Christian Bible, when he was merely taken up to heaven according to the Qur'an (Leaman 2006b: 305–10) and why the stories of the Jewish prophets are often rather different from their accounts in the Jewish Bible. This corruption of the message was not the fault of Jews or Christians, or of God, but just reflected the difficult conditions of the time that made it hard for the message to be transmitted and accepted in its pure state.

Nonetheless, the view of the religions being different routes to the same God is a very Islamic view, in that Jews do not regard the New Testament or the Qur'an as having any religious significance for them, and Christians have no need to acknowledge the truth of Muhammad's mission as recounted in the Qur'an. Islam has to show why although it appears to be the youngest of the religions it is the best. It attempts this by suggesting that, in fact, it is not the youngest but the oldest religion, the original religion that Judaism and Christianity have adulterated and formed into their own ersatz religions, which have a rather slim connection with the divine origins of faith itself.

We can see at work with early Islam the tendency for a religion that comes out of other religions to stress the common factors between the new faith and the old ones. After all, this is helpful for conversion, since one can argue that there is not that much difference between the faiths, and so conversion is not such a big deal. In a commercial context, merchants who are trying to get the public to buy a new product will often link it with older and more familiar products so that the public knows what sort of thing it is and find it tempting. The Qur'an often lumps Jews and Christians together as People of the Book, and other groups are also linked with them in respect of having a book. On the other hand, it also sometimes takes a harsher view of Jews as compared with Christians (Leaman 2006c: 59–73). Christians at least, unlike Jews, believe that Jesus was a prophet, or so it is said, but Christians nonetheless have many mistaken ideas about him. They believe, according to the Qur'an, that he has a divine or semi-divine status, and this belief is wrong, and they believe that he was crucified, instead of taken up to heaven, and this is also wrong. The Jews are said to tend to try to kill their prophets (although, of course, they do not regard Jesus as a prophet). There is a real issue as to whether Christians will be saved when the world comes to an end, since although their behavior may have been virtuous and they did believe in the significance of Jesus, they also lacked faith in God to such an extent that they believed he could have allowed his prophet to die the sort of humiliating death that is represented by the crucifixion. They also fail to understand what specifically happened to Jesus since they do not accept the prophecy of Muhammad and the authority of the Qur'an, so they are clearly only in possession of a much earlier and incomplete message. Not that God sent them an incomplete message, but it has been manipulated, so they misunderstand its real nature, and good evidence of that is provided by their refusal to accept the last message as conveyed through Muhammad. The implication is that had they understood the message they received from Jesus they would have moved onto accepting the final message, that brought by the Prophet Muhammad.

But to return to the modern world for a moment, as President Obama said when trying to take the heat out of the controversy in 2010 to do with the building of a mosque

at Ground Zero, surely we all pray to the same God. Not all Muslims are so sure. In 2009 there was an attempt in Malaysia to forbid non-Muslims from referring to God as Allah, the Arabic word for God which, as such, is used by all Arabic speakers, not only by Muslims, when referring to God. It is an interesting question, though, whether the God of the Qur'an is the same as the God of the other Abrahamic texts. He seems rather more aggressive than the God of the New Testament but not as aggressive as the God of the Jewish Bible. As we have seen, the Qur'anic view is that Jews and Christians have mistaken ideas about him: "And the Jews say, Ezra is the son of God and the Christians say, the Messiah is the son of God. That is what they say with their mouths. They imitate the saying of those who disbelieved in the past" (9.30). On this view, both the Christians and the Jews fell for false messiahs, and this almost makes them unbelievers, a very serious charge indeed. They appear to fall at least into the category of *munaḥiqun*, hypocrites, another serious charge, since the implication is that they do not really believe in what they say. They all received the pure monotheistic doctrine from their prophets and they adulterated it and made it dirty and inaccurate, albeit more in line with what they wanted to do anyway. They turned something tidy and neat into something messy and mixed up with other things, hence the point of the accusation of *shirk* or idolatry, associating God with other, lesser, beings.

But one sensitive question remains to be resolved: do monotheists have to accept that the God of the Jews and the Christians and the Muslims is the same God? After all, the God who is described in the Qur'an and in the rest of the significant literature such as the *hadith*, the Traditions of the Prophet and his Companions, the commentaries on the law and so on, is represented as a being who is very similar to the God we find in the Jewish Bible and the New Testament. Those hostile to Islam often say that the Christian God is a God of love while the God of the Qur'an and the Jewish Bible is vengeful and violent, and yet it has to be said that Christian history and other significant Christian theological works provide little evidence of such a distinction. These sweeping generalizations about how religions classify God rarely get it right, and this is hardly surprising given the complexity of the leading character in a number of complex systems of religious thought.

According to John Hick, there is not, in the end, much difference between the world's religions, since there is not much difference in what we admire in a person morally (Hick 2010). Since that person could be a member of just about any religion, there cannot be any significant basic distinctions in the nature of the religions. For Hick, what is important is the behavior of individuals and so the precise theological accounts of God given by specific religious traditions are not crucial if they do not affect human action. However, this point could be turned in a different direction if we argue that what is important in human action is not so much what we do but why we do it. Many would argue that if we do the right thing for the wrong reason then there is no merit in it, although presumably it is better than doing the wrong thing. So for some Muslims believing in one God is not enough. It is essential to believe that Muhammad is his messenger, if one lives at a time when one could believe that. Otherwise, one's belief in the one God is an essentially problematic or incomplete belief, one that is muddled by other beliefs based on tribal loyalties and/or inaccurate understandings of the activities and potentialities of that God. The original Torah and the original Gospel are acceptable because they stem from God and the messengers he sent at that earlier stage. However, now they are in such a perverted state that some Muslim authorities say they do not even contain the name of God in any meaningful sense. There is no reason in that case

to show them any respect. The God of present day Jews and Christians, not to mention any other community that might be regarded as having a book, is not the same as the God of Islam. It is not like the Ka'ba, which went from being originally monotheist and constructed by Abraham and his son, to being polytheist and then finally monotheist again, and throughout this period it seems to have come under divine care and concern. But then it is the same physical object, so even if its use is corrupted, it itself can remain as it was. If the concept of God in Judaism and Christianity is corrupted, though, that concept does not remain the same. Its sense changes and therefore no longer captures the idea of God as Islam would interpret it.

Looking at the question from the point of view of Judaism and Christianity: is their God the same God who appears in the Qur'an? He is according to President Obama, but perhaps an American politician is not a good source of theological information on this issue. Jews would have to accept that the Torah, which we are told was given to Moses on Mount Sinai, is not in fact the text they have in front of them today, not just in the sense that there are a few differences but to the extent that it is totally inaccurate and self-serving. Christians would have to accept that Jesus was not really crucified, but his apparent death was a test set for Christians who are really to be rewarded at the end of time for not believing that God would allow Jesus to be killed in such a gruesome way. He was not then resurrected and he does not have any status except as one of the prophets sent to the world by God. It is not at all clear that the God who did all this is the same God as the God in the New Testament, to put it mildly. The conclusion has to be that unless one believes that the Prophet is "a mercy to the worlds" (21.107) and that the Qur'an is "a reminder to the worlds" (38.87, 68.53, 81.27) it is not at all obvious that the God of Islam is, in fact, the same God as the God of Judaism and Christianity.

Related Topics

Chapter 3: The God of the Jews and the Jewish God; Chapter 4: Christianity; Chapter 13: Evidence; Chapter 18: Physical Cosmology; Chapter 36: Religious Diversity; Chapter 37: Globalization

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Recommended Reading

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6

HINDU THEISM

David Peter Lawrence

Before proceeding to the discussion of Hindu theism, it should be noted that there has been a great deal of controversy about the very terms “Hindu” and “Hinduism.” We can steer clear of these controversies by using the terms to refer to a broad stream of religious and philosophical cultures that developed primarily in South Asia, but have spread throughout the world, and which can be distinguished from other groupings of cultures such as Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism (on problems of definition, see Flood 1996: 5–22; Lipner 1998: 1–21).

Within the broad stream of Hindu cultures, there have developed numerous varieties of theism and stances on theism. The majority of Hindu traditions can be described as theistic, in the sense that they believe in and engage in devotion (*bhakti*) to one or more gods. However, the Hindu theistic traditions diverge greatly regarding the identities, numbers and natures of deities, the deities’ relations to the world, and how to worship them. Some Hindu traditions subscribe to nontheistic doctrines of a religious ultimate reality or ultimate concern, in relation to which they subordinate notions of deity. The most notable examples of such doctrines are Pūrva Mīmāṃsā ritualism, and Advaita Vedānta on the absolute as ultimately beyond qualifications (*nirguṇa brahman*). This volume includes a chapter by Matthew Dasti that overviews Hindu and Buddhist philosophical arguments regarding theism. Here I offer additional comments on salient and distinctive features of Hindu religious and philosophical understandings of deities.

Sources

Hindu understandings of deities are articulated in a great variety of sources over more than 3,000 years of history. Writings pertaining to theism in the religious and intellectual language of Sanskrit begin with the corpus of the Veda, the earliest parts of which date back to perhaps 1200 BCE. Pertinent Sanskrit literature also includes the long epics *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, the numerous mythological compendia called *Purāṇas*, the tantric Āgamas, Tantras, and *Samhitas*, scholastic philosophical and theological works, manuals on religious doctrines and practices, hymns, poems, stories, novels, and so on (for overviews of the literature of classical Hinduism, see Flood 1996; Klostermaier 2000; Lipner 1998). Though learning in Sanskrit is now less prominent, classic writings in that language are still regarded as authoritative by many Hindus. Some new Sanskrit texts are still being composed on various topics, including theism.

Since the early centuries of the Common Era, extensive Hindu literatures have developed in languages other than Sanskrit. There are ancient and ongoing streams of theistic devotional poetry in South Indian languages such as Tamil, Kannada,

Malayalam, and Telegu (for examples, see Ramanujan 1979, 1981; Dehejia 1988). Likewise, devotional literatures in Northern languages such as Marathi, Hindi, Punjabi, Kashmiri, Bengali, and others, have developed and flourished (see Hawley and Jurgensmeyer 1988). There are also many academic and non-academic prose works on Hindu theism in all vernacular Indian languages, including English. Besides written traditions, there are many local, orally transmitted expressions of theistic narratives and practices throughout South Asia, in poetry, song, ritual, and so on.

Predominant Representations of Hindu Gods

Although Hinduism includes some nontheistic philosophies, the majority of its philosophical and scholarly, as well as popular traditions, can be characterized as theistic, in the sense that one or more deities are conceived as the religious ultimate reality and ultimate concern. Unfortunately, it is impossible to do justice here to the tremendous diversity of symbols, myths, and practices pertaining to deities presented in the long history of Sanskrit and vernacular, written and oral, pan-Indian and local traditions, and we must confine ourselves to a description of some of the broad patterns.

The earlier parts of the large Vedic corpus present a cosmology that comprises a number of deities, often associated with forces of nature such as the sky, the sun, the moon, storms, night, dawn, and so on. There are references to battles between gods and demons, such as those between the storm deity Indra and Vṛtra, “the Obstructor.” The various deities are praised in hymns and worshipped with sacrifices (*yajña*), in return for various worldly benefits and for an afterlife in heaven. Sacrifices include, besides the ritual killing of animals, the Soma sacrifice, comprising the preparation and ingestion of a hallucinogenic drug, Soma. Soma sacrifices are said to bestow religious visions.

Beginning with sections of the earliest text in the corpus, the *Ṛg Veda*, Vedic works also engage in speculations on the creation of the universe by some supreme being, for example by an ineffable “One” (*Ṛg Veda* X.129) or by the sacrificial dismemberment of a cosmic person (*Ṛg Veda* 10.90). This development reached an early culmination in the great monistic and monotheistic, speculations and revelations in the Upaniṣads (O’Flaherty 1981; Hillebrandt 1999; Olivelle 1996; on Vedic imagination about gods, see Mahony 1998; on the broader ancient history of South Asian religion, see Samuel 2008).

Max Muller, in the nineteenth century, used Friedrich Schelling’s term “henotheism” to describe the character of the hymns of the *Ṛg Veda* such that numerous deities are successively praised as if they are one ultimate God (Muller 1880). Many have viewed this henotheism as deriving from a growing recognition by ancient Hindus of a unitary essence behind all the deities. Henotheism, understood as such a recognition of a unitary divine essence, can be taken as approximately typifying the majority of Hindu understandings of deities up to the present.

According to one popular formula, there are 330 million gods in Hinduism. Nevertheless, most Hindus have believed that there is ultimately one deity, and that the diversity of other gods are his or her emanations or manifestations, representing his or her agency in particular contexts. Hindus freely worship one deity after another as the manifestations of the same God. Many Hindus have held a “pluralistic” position that the various expressions of theism are equally legitimate. However, Hindu sectarian groups also advocate a variety of “inclusivistic” stances that rank the various forms hierarchically according to their approximation to the nature of one or another high deity.

“Exclusivism,” which maintains that only one’s own deity is real, is rare in Hinduism (for recent treatments of these categories of interreligious understanding, see Knitter 2005).

The three gods most commonly worshipped as the ultimate in Hindu traditions are Viṣṇu, Śiva, and the Goddess, variously called Devī, “Goddess,” and Śakti, “Power.” This triad of deities must be distinguished from an overlapping group of three deities who are conceived in the Purāṇas and other authoritative traditions to perform particular cosmic functions—Brahmā, who *creates* the universe anew in each vast cosmic cycle, and also, in some accounts, bestows the Veda upon humanity; Viṣṇu, who *preserves* the universe by intervening to rectify problems through his *avatāras*, “descents” or “incarnations”; and Śiva, who *destroys* the universe at the end of each cosmic cycle.

Actually, Brahmā is only very rarely worshipped. Moreover, whichever deity is conceived as the ultimate is understood to be the source who emanates the others, both the triad who perform the aforementioned cosmic functions and lower supernatural beings, and thus to be the ultimate agent in their actions. Thus, in a Vaiṣṇava (Viṣṇu-worshipping) framework, Viṣṇu is not merely the Preserver. He also creates Brahmā, who emerges from his navel to create the world, as well as Śiva to destroy the world. The situation is analogous in Śaiva (Śiva-worshipping) and Śākta (Goddess-worshipping) frameworks. The popular and tantric formula of Śiva as performing five cosmic acts (*pañcakṛtya*)—creation; preservation; destruction; as well as the delusion of creatures, which leads to their suffering; and grace, which bestows liberation—actually applies to most deities whom Hindus conceive to be the ultimate.

With regard to creation, the author is not aware of any Hindu accounts approximating a standard Abrahamic notion of creation *ex nihilo*, that is, leaving aside abstractions of *ex nihilo*, such as Robert Cummings Neville’s notion of the creation of the determinate from indeterminacy (Neville 1991). The most frequent Hindu conception seems to be that the supreme being creates the world through emanation, sometimes explained in terms of sexual union with his or her emanated consort.

Hindu emanation doctrines can largely be classified as varieties of what is called panentheism, “all-in-Godism,” insofar as they view the world as comprehended within the nature of a transcendent-cum-immanent deity. However, Hindu panentheism/emanationism also varies in the degree to which it emphasizes God’s simultaneous transcendence and immanence. Contemporary Hindu thinkers, from neo-Vedāntins to Aurobindo’s evolutionism and tantric revisionists have ascribed more importance to the dialectic of transcendence and immanence in order to demonstrate the relevance of religion to modern and postmodern this-worldly values (Lawrence 2001).

Some Hindu philosophies and theologies explain creation not as God’s emanation but, rather, in terms of his or her efficient causality in the arrangement of pre-existing matter (*prakṛti*) or atoms (*aṇu*). (See Matthew Dasti’s account, in Chapter 2, of Naiyāyika’s demonstration of the existence of God as a teleological argument.) Two examples of philosophical and theological doctrines of the panentheistic/emanationist relation of the deity to creation and individual souls will be discussed below.

While it is impossible to summarize the vast range of Hindu myths about deities, besides those describing creation, a few well-known narratives can be mentioned (for more examples, see O’Flaherty 1978; Dimmit and van Buitenen 1978). Although a number of deities take on *avatāras*, Viṣṇu is the deity most well known for that. Viṣṇu is most commonly said to have taken ten *avatāras*, the two most well known of which are Rāma and Kṛṣṇa. In the epic *Rāmāyaṇa*, Rāma, with the help of an army of monkeys

and bears, defeats a ten-headed demon, Rāvaṇa, whose evil had culminated in the kidnapping of Rāma's own wife, Sītā.

The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* recounts the life of Kṛṣṇa, including his adolescent affairs with married women (Gopīs) in a village of cow herders. These affairs are often interpreted as generally symbolic of human devotees' love for God above all others. Particularly important in this regard are Kṛṣṇa's affairs with a Gopī named Rādhā. In the *Mahābhārata* epic, Kṛṣṇa restores social order by assisting a group of five brothers, the Pāṇḍavas, in a war to recover their kingdom taken by their cousins, the 100 evil Kauravas. The *Mahābhārata* includes as one of its books one of the most influential Hindu manuals of devotion (*bhakti*) to God, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, which is discussed further below.

The Purāṇas, epics, and Āgamas recount a great variety of myths about Śiva. As Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty has demonstrated, a number of these narratives negotiate the values in Hindu culture of world enjoyment versus renunciation, or eroticism versus asceticism. Śiva spends long cosmic periods alternately engaging in ascetic austerities and in sexual relations with his consort. Śiva is often represented iconically by a stylized representation of male and female genitals (*liṅga* and *yoni*), which is viewed as symbolizing both sexuality/fertility and the control of sexuality (O'Flaherty 1973). Particularly important to tantric traditions are narratives of Śiva's terrific forms as Bhairava, symbolizing divine power as overcoming lower conceptions of social and ritual purity. Another very popular story describes Śiva's mercy upon a hunter endangered by a tiger, after the hunter had inadvertently dropped sacred bilva leaves on Śiva's icon (which act would commonly be understood as a ritualistic expression of devotion).

The Goddess likewise is believed to take on many forms. Sometimes she is viewed as a consort of one of the male gods, constituting his Śakti, "Power." Sometimes she is said to personify the power of all other deities but not to have any consort herself. Popular forms of the Goddess are Durgā and Kālī, both sometimes Śiva's consort; Lakṣmī, sometimes wife of Viṣṇu; and Sarasvatī, sometimes wife of Brahma. Durgā and Kālī are particularly popular. Durgā, who rides a tiger or lion, is known for her defeat of many demons who threaten the well-being of the universe, including the buffalo demon, Maṇiṣāsura. Kālī, depicted as a terrifying figure with a waistband of arms and a necklace of skulls, is bloodthirsty in her battles with demons. Lakṣmī is the deity of prosperity, and Sarasvatī of learning and music. Most forms of the Goddess, even when represented as awesome in their power, are believed to be maternal and beneficent by their devotees.

There are numerous other important deities besides those frequently conceived as a monotheistic ultimate. One of the most important of these is Ganeṣa, a son of Śiva with the head of an elephant, believed to be a protective figure that removes obstacles. Another is Hanumān, the monkey-god who helped Rāma in his battle against Rāvaṇa, idealized for his devotion to Rāma and Sītā. Other deities important in particular regions include the South Indian Ayappa, regarded as the son of Śiva and a female *avatāra* of Viṣṇu; and smallpox goddesses such as the North Indian Śītālā.

Matthew Dasti has discussed the Advaita Vedānta philosopher Śaṅkara's conception of the ultimate, *brahman*, as at the highest level *nirguṇa*, "without qualities," and at a lower, provisional level *saguṇa*, "with qualities" (see [Chapter 2](#) of this volume). For Śaṅkara, the former is a pure unity, identical with the *ātman*, "Self," whereas the latter consists of an imperfect realization of *brahman* as a more typically monotheistic God, experienced as other than the devotee. Devotional traditions likewise often distinguish cataphatic, *saguṇa* and apophatic, *nirguṇa* levels in the understanding of God/Goddess. However, in distinction from Śaṅkara, they often view both forms as nonidentical with

the devotee. The *Bhagavad Gītā* discusses a complementary dichotomy of the personal versus the unmanifest (*avyakta*) forms of Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa, realized respectively by devotion and Vedāntic contemplation.

Some traditions, for example, Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, which pursues the recollection of Kṛṣṇa/Viṣṇu's romantic play (*līlāsmaraṇa*, discussed below), and Bengali poems and songs praising the Goddess (see McDermott 2001), conceive the deity primarily in a *saguṇa* form, as endowed with many mythical qualities. Others, such as the Southern Vīra Śaiva tradition, conceive the deity in a more *nirguṇa* manner (Ramanujan 1979). Furthermore, some late medieval, North Indian devotional traditions promulgated by poet-Saints (*sant*) such as Kabir, are so radical in their *nirguṇa* emphasis as to defy identification with any particular kind of Hinduism, or even as Hindu rather than Muslim or Sikh. It is out of such traditions that Sikhism emerged, to become an independent religious movement (for examples, see Hawley and Juergensmeyer 1988).

Motives and Expressions of Devotion

Devotees worship their chosen ultimate deity (*iṣṭadevatā*), or others whom they conceive as emanations or delegates of the ultimate, for a great variety of reasons. As seems common in most theistic religions, worshippers implore the divine for help with various worldly struggles, to overcome illness and other problems, and for the general well-being of their families. They also worship deities for the attainment of liberation (*mokṣa*) from suffering in the cycle of repeated births and deaths (*samsāra*) propelled by action-linked-with-its-consequences (*karma*). In Hindu theism, liberation is variously conceived as eternal intimacy with the deity in heaven, union with the deity, likeness with the deity, or, in some cases, absolute identification with him or her.

Hindus, likewise, utilize numerous methods to worship their deities, ranging from concrete rituals to the cultivation of intellectual, emotional and intuitive attitudes and realizations that transform all aspects of their lives. Concrete ceremonies, which can be summarized under the general term *pūjā*, "worship," are generally performed before an image of the deity being worshipped. They are performed most elaborately in temples, and in a simpler fashion in domestic shrines, located in dedicated worship rooms, in a closet, or on a shelf. Insofar as worshippers during *pūjā* direct their gaze at an image of the deity, they are said to be having the *darśan*, "vision," of the divine (see Eck 1998).

Offerings to deities include incense, food, flowers and money. Devotees receive the food back as expressions of the blessing (*prasāda*) of the deity; they also receive marks of paste or powder on the forehead, or garlands of flowers as indications of this blessing. Another common practice of worship is *ārati*, which consists of waving a lamp in circles around the image of the deity. At certain times, worship also includes the bathing (*abhiṣeka*) of the image. Prayers or *mantras* are commonly recited during *pūjā*, and are central to individual practices of meditation. Devotees might also meet at temples or other public places, or at private homes, for the collective singing of religious songs (*bhajan*, *kīrtan*).

The offerings to deities during *pūjā* can be understood as largely superseding earlier Vedic sacrifices (*yajña*). However, sacrifices of buffaloes and goats are still sometimes performed in the worship of the Goddess. Devotees might participate in the sacrifice by ingesting the blood of the animal. However, Brahmans and others adhering to nonviolence might utilize symbolic substitutes for the animal and its blood (Flood 1996). During the long period of the composition of the Veda and since, the practice of sacrifice has been interpreted in numerous ways.

Very religious people endeavor to dedicate their entire life to devotion to their chosen deity, and to following that deity's guidance on proper social and ethical duty (*dharma*). The *Mahābhārata*'s section called *Bhagavad Gītā*, "Song of the Lord," one of the most influential Hindu classics on the practice of devotion (*bhakti yoga*), explains this in terms of the practice of sacrifice. Before the *Bhagavad Gītā* and since, some Hindus have interpreted sacrifice as ascetic renunciation. The *Gītā*, however, is concerned with spiritual practice (*yoga*) within the life of the householder. It argues that one must, rather, sacrifice *attachment to results* in the performance of dutiful action, and even *one's sense of individual agency*, in loving surrender to God (Miller 1986). This is the spiritual practice of dutiful action (*karma yoga*) performed for the sake of devotion (*bhakti yoga*).

Whereas the style of loving devotion presented in the *Bhagavad Gītā* is rather sober, in traditions espoused by poet-Saints in South India in the early centuries of the common era, and in Sanskrit scriptures such as the *Bhagavata Purāṇa*, it became quite ecstatic or charismatic. In many traditions of *bhakti* throughout the subcontinent, devotees endeavor to achieve a sort of inspired madness of overwhelming love for, and absorption in, their divinity (Singer 1971; Ramanujan 1979, 1981; Dehejia 1988; McDaniel 1989).

This section has emphasized that, beyond some basic features of myth, ritual, ethics, and meditation, there is tremendous diversity in Hindu theistic doctrines and practices. In the following two sections, we will examine in more detail two traditions, one Vaiṣṇava and one Śaiva, notable both for their distinctiveness from Abrahamic monotheism as well as from one another. These are not meant to typify all the worship of either Viṣṇu or Śiva, but only to illustrate the variety of Hindu theistic traditions (for a classic comparison of the broad movements of Vaiṣṇavism and Śaivism, see Gonda 1970).

Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism

As an illustration of a form of Vaiṣṇava theism, we may briefly consider the tradition of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism. This broad movement was founded by the ecstatic saint Caitanya (c.1486–1533 CE), who is believed by devotees to have been an incarnation of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā in one body. It was further elaborated in the theologies of six of Caitanya's disciples known as the Gosvāmins, who include Rūpa Gosvāmin and Jīva Gosvāmin. The present day Hare Krishna movement derives from this tradition.

According to the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, Kṛṣṇa is not merely an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, but is, rather, the quintessential form of the deity. He emanates and controls the cosmos through various modalities of his Śakti, or feminine energy. Thus he creates souls through his Consciousness (*cit*) Śakti; he creates the universe through his Magic Illusion (*māyā*) Śakti; and he generates the mutual enjoyment that he and devotees experience through his Enjoyment (*hlādinī*) Śakti (Klostermaier 2000: 115). Kṛṣṇa's relationship with creation and his devotees is described as one of "incomprehensible identity and difference" (*acintyabhedābheda*). Please note that although various practices are described below, their performance is said to be inspired and enabled by Kṛṣṇa's grace.

The goal of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism devotee is to realize the intimacy and partial identity with Kṛṣṇa through the loving immersion in the aesthetic appreciation of his life, as recounted in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, Jayadeva's *Gītagovinda*, and more specialized sectarian literature. Developing ideas from earlier theorists such as the nondual Kashmir Śaiva philosopher Abhinavagupta (discussed below), the Gosvāmins theorized on aestheticized emotional states (*bhāva*, *rasa*) in which Kṛṣṇa is devoutly contemplated as

an infant, child, boy, and young man (see Klostermaier 2000: 116). Devotion is conceived particularly as an effort to participate sympathetically in, or imitate, the passion between the adolescent Kṛṣṇa and the Gopīs in the cow-herding town of Vṛndāvana (*rāgānugabhakti*).

Devotees endeavor to participate thus in Kṛṣṇa's life in a variety of ways. Besides the generic Hindu practices of *pūjā*, devotees engage in collective singing (*kīrtan*) and individual meditation on *mantras* bestowed by a spiritual preceptor (*guru*). Devotees may also re-enact Kṛṣṇa's famous dance with all of the Gopīs, the *rāsa līlā*. A more advanced set of practices focus on the memory of the adolescent Kṛṣṇa's love play every day in Vṛndāvana with Rādhā and the other Gopīs. The "recollection of the play" (*līlāsmaraṇa*) is conceived not as a mere memory or commemoration of mundane facts, but in some respects like Platonic anamnesis, as a sort of *a priori* experience of a higher reality.

Kṛṣṇa's day is believed to take place eternally in an archetypical, heavenly Vṛndāvana, distinct from the earthly city where the historical Kṛṣṇa is said to have lived. To mention some of the features of that day described in the contemplative manuals: After Kṛṣṇa is awakened by his mother, his married lover, Rādhā, comes to cook him breakfast. Kṛṣṇa performs chores with the cows, and then proceeds to frolic in the woods with his friends. As the day progresses, he spends an increasing amount of time in love play with the Gopīs. At a certain point, Kṛṣṇa engages in the *rāsa līlā* with the Gopīs, causing each to experience herself as dancing individually with him. Finally, he spends much of the night making love with Rādhā and falls asleep with her in a cottage in the forest. Their friends wake them in time for Kṛṣṇa to return to his parents' house, and for Rādhā to return to the house she shares with her husband. Then it begins again.

In training for the recollection of the day, the *guru* informs the devotee of his or her higher identity, with a perfected body (*siddha deha*), as one of the creatures participating in that day, such as a bird, forest spirit, or a girlfriend of Rādhā. The disciple contemplates this minutely and endeavors to live in that higher reality observing Kṛṣṇa's love play. He or she practices in the hope at death to remain eternally in the higher Vṛndāvana (Delmonico 1995; Haberman 2001; Schweig 2005).

Nondual Kashmir Śaivism

Since early in the twentieth century there has been an increasing development of interest in, and efforts to revive, a group of monistic, tantric Śaiva traditions that developed in Kashmir from the latter centuries of the first millennium CE through the early centuries of the second. Although largely disappearing in Kashmir itself, these traditions spread to other parts of the subcontinent in original and transformed expressions. Nowadays the traditions are most often referred to collectively as Kashmir Śaivism. However, they must be distinguished from older, dualistic Śaiva Siddhānta traditions that flourished in medieval Kashmir, and were also transmitted to the South (on Śaiva Siddhānta, see Davis 1991; Sivaraman 1973). For that reason, the traditions being discussed are also sometimes called nondualistic or monistic Kashmir Śaivism.

These traditions are both monotheistic and unqualifiedly monistic. According to nondualistic Śaivism, everything ultimately exists in identity—not a mere "incomprehensible identity and difference" (*acintyābheda*)—with the God Śiva. Thus in these traditions the panentheistic synthesis of transcendence and immanence entailed by any doctrine of emanation is particularly strong, a point emphasized variously in

contemporary revivals (Lawrence 2001). Like Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism and most Hindu monotheisms with a male God, monistic Śaiva traditions also appropriate Śāktism to explain emanation. The Goddess, Śakti, is Śiva's integral consort and Power through whom he performs all his cosmic acts. According to the central monistic Śaiva myth, Śiva divides himself from Śakti and then, in sexual union, emanates and controls the wholly self-identical universe through her.

Monistic Śaiva practice, as tantric, also appropriates tantric versions of Śāktism. Without entering into complex historical problematics, tantric traditions can be characterized by the pursuit of intimate relations with the Goddess, Śakti—either to be possessed by her or to possess her—such as thereby to attain power ranging from limited magical capacities to sublimated participation in the divine cosmic acts (Woodroffe 1981; Sanderson 1985; Chakravarty 1997; White 2000: 7–9; Lawrence 2008: 5–11; Furlinger 2009). In that light, liberation in monistic Śaivism is to realize that one is in fact Śiva, as *Śaktiman*, “the possessor of Power.” As with Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, practices leading to that realization are inspired and enabled by God's grace; however in this tradition God is identical with one's true Self.

The monistic Śaiva aspirant pursues identification with the omnipotent Lord Śiva through ritual practices that re-enact his emanation and control of the universe through Śakti. As the *Vijñāna-Bhairava* proclaims, Śakti is Śiva's “door” or “face” (Singh 1979: 17). Nondual Śaiva practices range from Kaula sexual rituals in which the male and female partners become Śiva and Śakti (Dupuche 2003; White 2003; Silburn 1988; Chalier-Visuvalingam, online), through internalized contemplations of mantras (Alper 1989; Muller-Ortega 1992), maṇḍalas (Sanderson 1986), and philosophical and theological speculations, as described here.

Within the historical elaboration of nondualistic Śaivism, a great variety of philosophical and theological codes were propounded for the same mythic and ritual pattern. In Spanda tantra, one possesses Śakti conceived as *spanda*, “cosmic pulsation” (Dyczkowski 1987). In the Pratyabhijñā philosophy of Utpaladeva (c.900–950 CE) and Abhinavagupta (c.950–1020 CE), Śiva's emanation and control of the universe through Śakti is interpreted epistemologically as his self-recognition (*ahampratyavamarśa*, *pratyabhijñā*) and Supreme Speech (*parāvāk*), and ontologically as his cosmocratic agency (*sarvakartṛtā*, *svāntarya*). The system endeavors intellectually and ritually to lead one to identification with the omnipotent Śiva by demonstrating the foundational and constitutive role of his self-recognition, speech, and agency as underlying all topics of investigation (Torella 2002; Lawrence 1999).

The Pratyabhijñā system also elaborates a philosophical psychology that describes the higher identity realized by the practitioner as Śiva's “I-hood” (*ahambhava*) or “perfect I-hood” (*pūrṇāhamtā*). This is the quintessential reality underlying ordinary egoistic identity, referred to by such terms as “I-concept” (*ahamkāra*), “pride” or “self-conception” (*abhimāna*), and “I-am-ness” (*asmitā*). Contrary to common Hindu as well as Abrahamic monotheisms, as indeed to much of theistic and nontheistic religion globally, the Pratyabhijñā system does not advocate the subordination or effacement of the human ego but, rather, its *universalization and transfiguration into its essential nature as perfect I-hood* (Hulin 1978; Dyczkowski 1992; Lawrence 2008). This psychology is a direct consequence of the system's character as both a monotheism and a monism.

Abhinavagupta also describes how the experience of aesthetic sentiments (*rasa*) through poetry, drama, and music leads one to participate in Śiva's subjective bliss (Gnoli 1968). His formulations were highly influential on later Hindu aesthetics and theology,

including Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism. Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta's Pratyabhijñā thought was also influential on later traditions of tantra, including the popular Śākta movement of Śrīvidyā (see Brooks 1990).

Conclusion

This chapter barely scratches the surface of the rich and complex Hindu understandings and practices pertaining to deities. A fuller consideration of the Hindu religious heritage will be indispensable to the advancement of reflections on theism in the globalizing philosophy of religions.

Related Topics

Chapter 2: Asian Philosophy; Chapter 36: Religious Diversity; Chapter 50: Spirituality

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Recommended Reading

- Davis, R. H. (1991) *Ritual in an Oscillating Universe: Worshipping Śiva in Medieval India*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. This work introduces and interprets the important dualistic-monotheistic Śaiva tradition of Śaiva Siddhānta.

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7

SIKHISM

Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh

Sikh theism is an ever-dynamic dialectic between an impersonal infinite Being, and a palpable experience of that One. Sikh scripture begins with *Ikk Oan Kar*—*One Being Is* (ੴ), and the entire 1,430-page text passionately embraces this absolute principle of Oneness. The numeral “1” (*ikk*) is a vivid expression of unity shared by humans across cultures. *Oan* (from *aum*) is the primal vocalic syllable of the Indian languages, expressing the totality of Being. *Kar* (meaning “is”) expresses the certainty of that Being, and its unclosed arc projects an opening towards infinite possibilities. Interestingly, Heidegger’s comment on “is” highlights the power of this tiny word for Sikh theism: “[is] speaks everywhere in our language and tells of Being even where it does not appear expressly” (Pattison 2011: 6). Since the singular Being *is*, ontological, epistemological, teleological or moral proofs for its existence occupy no place in Sikhism.

The founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak (1469–1539), had the revelation that the singular Being is within a religiously and culturally diverse milieu. He was born in the Punjabi village of Talwandi (in modern day Pakistan), and later witnessed Babur defeat the Muslim Lodi Sultan to establish his own Mughal Empire. In Nanak’s historical and geographical horizon, pan-Hinduism and Islam were the two dominant religious groups. Though neither was homogenous by any means, there was much conflict over “monotheistic” and “polytheistic” notions, and “God” was voiced as either Ram or Rahim, with each belonging to one of the two distinct Sanskritic and Persio-Arabic worlds. Guru Nanak combined numerical, alphabetic, and geometric modes of knowledge to celebrate the absolute actuality and constant potentiality of the singular Being. This transcendent One was felt by him in the depths of his own being and simultaneously recognized in *everybody* else.

Nanak’s theistic ideal was concretized by his fifth successor Guru Arjan, who consciously chose to incorporate the different religious paradigms of his day into the Sikh sacred volume. In 1604 he collected the verses of the Sikh Gurus, Hindu Bhagats, and Muslim saints from different social and geographical backgrounds into a volume and gave them equal status. Guru Arjan heard the convergence of different languages to articulate that One: “Some call it Rama, some call it Khuda; some worship it as Vishnu, some as Allah” (Guru Granth (hereafter GG): 885). He set most of the text into musical measures so readers and hearers could re-experience that One, and housed it in the Harmandir (the Golden Temple of modern times) with its four doors, which was an architectural symbol that the four societal classes of his milieu were equally welcome. Through a diversity of accents, intonations, grammar, vocabulary, and imagery, the Sikh sacred volume palpably reproduces Nanak’s universal One. The text carries no prescriptions or proscriptions; it does not elaborate on doctrines concerning “God.” It is

but a collection of sublime longing for that One with only intimations. The wide range of symbols and images shatters conventional attitudes and male dominance, and in turn opens up the Divine in a plurality of enchanting relationships. However, patriarchal and/or colonial lenses fail to see its newness and fundamental inclusivity; as a result, mainstream theologians and exegetes model that One on the Abrahamic God. This chapter returns to the primary source, the Guru Granth, and explores Sikh theism from three perspectives: ontological, existential, and aesthetic.

Ontological

The numeral One at the very outset loudly spells out “monotheism,” but it is a different vision from that of the West. As a continuation of the Abrahamic traditions, Islam penetrated India with the concept of the “One God,” which conflicted with the polyphonic imagination of the diverse schools of the Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains. In Sikh ontology, there is no opposition between the One and the many, nor is there any dualism between unity and plurality. The Guru Granth claims, “*ikkasu te hoio ananta nanak ekasu mahi samae jio*—from the One issue myriads and into the One they are ultimately assimilated” (GG: 131). Unity becomes plurality and plurality eventually becomes unity. The Kantian dictum about totality being plurality regarded as unity echoes the same truth. Rather than an exclusivist monotheism, Sikh scripture consistently voices an inclusive oneness of Being. “Always, always you alone are the one Reality—*sada sada tun eku hai*” (GG: 139). Persian terminology is used to emphasize the unicity of Being: “*asti ek digari kui ek tui ek tui*—only the One is, there is none other; Only you, you only” (GG: 144). Similarly, “*hindu turk ka sahib ek*—Hindus and Muslims share the One sovereign” (GG: 1158; in this period, the term “Turk” referred to all Muslims). Since everything is a manifestation of that Being, all the manifestations would be a part of it. No god, no body, and no thing is excluded from this all pervasive being. The arc flying off Oan launches the imagination to intuit the unintuitable One, and everybody can perceive that One in their own way. Blotting out conventional icons and images that created animosities, Nanak’s mathematical One would embrace Allah, Ram, Devi, Tao, and Yahweh. The numerical symbol transcends every binary, every category, and reaches out to that singular Divine in a variety of most personal relations—father, mother, brother, friend, and lover.

Ikk Oan Kar is not a tautological statement, for Guru Nanak goes on to name that One as *sat* (Truth or Reality). His approach indicates his inclination to bring Being into language. As a contemporary scholar insightfully remarks:

Language gives us the very possibility of truth, since it is in language that the world is disclosed in such a way as to allow it be a common and continuous world, in which we live together by talking about it over time.

(Pattison: 173)

Guru Nanak names the abstract Being so that it could be actively engaged with in the lived context. By giving the name (*nam*) *sat*—a participle of *as* (to be)—he identifies that One as “existing,” “occurring,” “happening,” “being present.” Evidently, Truth is not an immutable essence. As we shall analyze more fully in the next section, Truth is a becoming which, in fact, flows into the human world of motions and emotions.

After introducing Being by the name (*nam*) of Truth (*sat*), the Guru spells out its nature: “*karta purakh nirbhau nirvair akal murat ajuni saibhan gur prasad*—creator person,

without fear, without enmity, timeless in form, unborn, self-existent, gift of the Guru.” Known as the Mul Mantra (root creed), this prelude to the inaugural hymn “Jap” recurs throughout the Guru Granth, and forms the core of daily prayers and ceremonies of the Sikh community. Without conjunctions or prepositions, it conveys the personal and impersonal qualities of that One. But its epigrammatic style allows conventional theological patterns to slip in. For example, the highly respectable UNESCO translation renders the Mul Mantra in biblical and masculine diction:

There is one God,
Eternal Truth is His name;
Maker of all things,
Fearing nothing and at enmity with nothing,
Timeless is His Image;
Not begotten, being of His own Being:
By the grace of the Guru, made known to men.

(UNESCO 1960)

Such a version distorts Guru Nanak’s unique revelation. It merely reproduces conventional monotheistic conceptions, which do not invite the multiplicity and poly-imagination of Guru Nanak’s numeral One. The Mul Mantra reveals a very different theistic perspective.

Guru Nanak does not reproduce any monistic system. He recognizes the True One generating the visible world without any disruption between “the One” and “all things.” The verbal root (*kr*, “create”) in *karta purakh* (creator person) evokes a theistic imagery quite different from monism in which the phenomenal world is understood as a manifestation or emanation rather than a creation (explained by Taliaferro 2009: 148). The birthing process of *karta purakh* is vastly different from a process involving a “Maker,” such as the God of Genesis who makes the world out of nothing. A mother does not make; she creates, she bodies forth. The term *purakh*, cast in iron masculinity not only in the UNESCO translation but invariably in all translations and exegeses, is defined in the Guru Granth as *both* male and female: “*ape purakh ape hi nar*—it itself is male; it itself is female” (GG: 1020). In Sanskrit and Hindi, “*purusha*” is the word for the grammatical person in verbs and personal pronouns. In the Samkhya school of Hindu philosophy, however, Purusha is identified as pure consciousness and is antithetical to Prakrti, the physical world of matter. Guru Nanak’s “*karta purakh*” retains the gender-neutral qualities of Hindi grammar, but aborts any sort of dualism between the metaphysical and the physical.

The Guru Granth repeatedly affirms, “*ap sat kia sabh sat tis prabh te sagal utpat*—Itself Truth, creates but Truth; all creation comes from the Divine” (GG: 294). Since the creator attribute of the Being is almost simultaneous with its True Name (follows it immediately), scriptural verses celebrate the phenomenal world as the fullness and reality of Truth: “*sace te pavana paia pavane te jal hoe jal te tribhavan sajaia ghat ghat jot samoe*—from Truth came air, from the air came water, from the water were created the three worlds; in each and every heart permeates its light” (GG: 19). The singular creator is ever present in our multifaceted world with its myriad species, countless languages, political systems, and theological categories. How could anything be false or illusionary when that one Truth pervades each and every particle: “*jhuth na dharti jhut na pani*—the earth is not false; water is not false” (GG: 1240).

Often the Arabic term *qudrat* (in the sense of what is created or natural) is used as a disclosure for the One. Physical matter including earth, skies, and nether regions; the psychological states of joy, love, and fear; the religious texts of Hindus and Muslims; and practical activities such as eating, drinking, and dressing up all characterize that formless One in unison:

qudrat disai qudrat suniai qudrat bhau sukh saru
qudrat patali akasi qudrat sarab akaru
qudrat veda purana kateba qudrat sarab vicaru
qudrat khana pina painanu qudrat sarab piaru

(GG: 464)

What we see is the One's *qudrat*,
 What we hear is the One's *qudrat*,
Qudrat is at the core of happiness and fear,
 The skies, the nether regions and all that is visible is the One's *qudrat*
 The Vedas, the Puranas, the Quran, indeed all thought is *qudrat*,
 Eating, drinking, dressing up is *qudrat*, so is all love *qudrat*!

In this philosophically intricate passage, the entire cosmos is merely the nature of that One, our first principle. It is the original force, the sole reality. As such, there can be nothing beside that One and nothing outside of it. While creating a harmonious bond between all matter, thought, emotion, and action, the passage spells out an inclusivist approach towards other faiths. Hindu and Muslim scriptures (*veda purana kateba*) and all modes of reflection (*sarab vicaru*) are celebrated as a revelation of the One Indivisible Reality. The One does not impose a scripture or specify a mode of thought. Rather, its very being consists in the many. Diversity of scriptures and ideologies is fully affirmed and profoundly respected. Most importantly, the creator person *itself* is all of these.

That One is then depicted without fear (*nir-bhau*) and without hostility/hatred (*nir-vair*). Guru Nanak's use of these characteristics provides a warm persona to the impersonal Being. Both of them are logical because fear and hostility/hatred only obstruct relations and destroy unity. Under the spell of fear and hatred, there would be fissures in the wholeness of Reality. These two personality traits signify that the Being in itself is not for itself: that One is oriented towards its creation heroically, courageously, wholesomely (opposite of fear), and with love (opposite of hostility).

In the next sequence of descriptions, "*murat*" conjures a definite shape (*murati* is an idol), and with the preceding word *akal* (timeless: *kal/time+a/not*), the formless quality of the Subject is attributed; similarly *jun* means birth, and its negative prefix "*a*" denotes the One beyond lifecycles. Implicit here is Guru Nanak's rejection of incarnation and idolatry, which he explicitly rejects in the fifth stanza of the hymn: the "One cannot be moulded (*thapia na jae*)."¹ The infinite One cannot take on any birth; its infinite possibilities are not reduced or confined to any specific form or shape in any lifecycle. Nothing verbal or solid or visual, neither male nor female, can encapsulate the infinite One. Nevertheless, this timeless, birth-less Being is in close relationship with the cosmos with its natural cycles of birth and death; it is not some static immutable eternal outside the fluctuations of time as scholars tend to interpret (see Singh 2007: 1–17; Mandair 2009: 175–239). Guru Nanak does not share ontological perspectives that view life in time negatively. He possesses a highly sophisticated awareness of time and his verse

throughout celebrates the flux of time. In fact, he regards temporality as an integral characteristic of Being, and therefore repeatedly marvels at the lunar and solar systems, the movements making up days and dates, the cyclic rhythm of seasons during the 12 months. As he asserts in the opening line of his Jap, “*ad sacu jugadi sacu hai bhi sacu nanak hosi bhi sacu*—Truth was in the beginning, Truth has been through the cycles, Truth is, and Truth says Nanak, will be ever more.” Surely in his imagining, the One (*akal murat ajuni*) is not out of time but actively functioning in and through the various tenses of time. Indeed, humans and the Divine share a common horizon of lived time.

The end of the Mul Mantra pronounces: *saibhan* (self-existent) *gur prasad* (gift of the Guru). The finale thus returns to the opening, the ever presence of the infinite One, and as it recapitulates the *sui generis* attributes, it thrusts the circle forward towards flesh and blood recipients. A nexus is established between the universal Being and those subjects who recognize it in their own particular historical, social, and personal reality. Guru Nanak’s usage of the term “*Prasad*,” with its synonyms “clearness” and “gift,” is perfect: the self-existent is, of course, absolutely evident, but is banished from memory; its disclosure therefore is a “gift” from the Guru. The Guru can be defined as the phenomenological mechanism that brings the ever present Being into consciousness.

It is important for the first Sikh Guru that there be perpetual “intersection of timeless and time” (to borrow T. S. Eliot’s ruminations from his *Four Quartets*). Juxtaposing the plurality of “all beings” (*sabhna jia*) to the singularity of their One giver (*ikk data*) he admits, “the Guru gave me one insight: all beings have that One giver, may I never ever forget” (Jap, stanza 5). His expression “*data*” (giver/bestower) underscores the generous and beneficent nature of the creator person recalled in the Mul Mantra. Like modern thinkers, Nanak knew memory is not merely a psychological faculty but an essential component of the historical being (Gadamer 1989: 17). He took on the role of the “Guru” precisely to reawaken his north-Indian contemporaries to the forgotten dimension of that singular Reality. Reminded of their sole creator-giver in a simple style, men and women started to follow Nanak, calling themselves his “Sikhs” (a Punjabi word that means “disciple” or “seeker” from the Sanskrit *shishya*; Pali *sekha*). A reflex of their memory was praxis. They gave up their caste, class, and religious differences; together in the village of Kartarpur by the banks of the River Ravi they heard and recited their Guru’s memory forming verse; together they cooked and ate meals, and enthusiastically served one another. The tradition was crystallized by Nanak’s nine successor Gurus. Just before the Tenth (Guru Gobind Singh, 1666–1708) passed away, he appointed the volume celebrating the One (compiled by the Arjan) as the Guru for future generations. The identity between the Guru (enlightener) and the revelation (of the singular Divine) is consistently affirmed: “*bani guru guru hai bani vicu bani amrit sare* —the Guru is the Word, the Word is the Guru, within the Word lie all elixirs” (GG: 982). Across centuries and continents, Sikhs revere the textual Guru for gifting them the awareness of their singular creator-giver they share with each and all.

It is critical that Nanak’s distinctive theistic configuration should not be reduced to any exclusionary concept or any intimidating male symbol. The standard translation “There is One God” does not quite express the vastness, the plenitude, or the intimacy bursting forth in the original. Instead of an opening into limitless possibilities as envisioned by the founder Sikh Guru, scholars and translators have selected and structured and shaped *Ikk Oan Kar* into a male god. As the feminist philosopher Mary Daly has warned, the term “god” is a reified “noun” that is static and laden with Jewish and Christian patriarchal assumptions. “God” with its “Father-Lord” connotations has negative

effects on society as it produces unhealthy perspectives on our experience with the Divine, and unhealthy relationships amongst ourselves. Transcending languages, cultures, and religions, Guru Nanak's primary numeral One with its soaring geometric arc is a universal modality. In any interpretation or translation, we must retain the Oneness of the numeral One, and I would say "Be-ing" (recommended by Mary Daly in a western context) works out quite well as an English equivalent. In this dynamic verb, the One can be accessed by anybody in any region of the world. Thus the Guru's intention is preserved, and the distinctive aspect of Sikh theism, discerned.

Existential

The theistic Oneness articulated by Guru Nanak is neither a monistic principle nor a conceptual doctrine; the *ikk* ("1") perpetually maintains a subjectivity and an existential quality. It is intriguing that from the rich variety of Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic terms at his disposal, Guru Nanak should have used *Oan* to articulate that One. *Oan* is the Punjabi equivalent of the Sanskrit word for Being, *Aum_or_Om*. *Aum* is expounded with much intellectual sophistication in the Mandukya Upanishad as a four-tier psychological journey (Radhakrishnan 1953: 695–705). The fourfold Mandukya analysis begins with the first stage, "A," which is the realm of consciousness in which there is an awareness of the world existing out there. It is basically a stage in which the subject is contrasted with objects, the self is separate from others. The second "U" stage is the psychological state of the semi-conscious where absolute categories start to break down. As the logical world begins to dissolve into a dreaming state, the self expands. One could, for instance, be in different places at the same time. The third stage, that of "M," is the deep sleep state, the state of unconsciousness, where nothing is experienced. It is a state of utter oblivion. The final stage, the fourth one in which the A and the U and the M are fused together, is the experience of totality. This is the unity that one is deeply aware of, a unity that one fully enjoys, a unity where the self is totally cognizant of its intrinsic infinite Oneness. Guru Nanak's usage of *Oan* in the Sikh primal statement manifests the theological and existential connection: the Divine is an inner, subjective experience of infinity here on earth rather than a doctrinal belief in "God" out there.

Clearly, orthopraxy takes precedence over orthodoxy, for a truthful mode of existence is deemed higher than the conception of Truth: "Truth is higher than everything but higher still is true living," declares Guru Nanak (GG: 62). Soon after pronouncing Being as *sat* (Truth), Nanak raises questions: How to become truth? How to break the walls of falsity? Kierkegaard's finale "Truth is subjectivity" plays out in Sikh scripture. For more important than the conceptual objective Truth is the subjective practice of truth in a person's life.

Two modes of being in the world are distinguished in Sikh scripture: *manmukh* (facing/*mukh* towards the *man*/self or ego) and *gurmukh* (facing the Guru/enlightenment). By constantly centering on the "I," "me," and "mine," the individual is wrenched from his/her universal root and reduced to a narrow self-centered personality. Just as a wall erects barriers so does the selfish obsession with pride and arrogance (*haumai*, literally "I-ness"). In this inauthentic state, the individual is divided from its divine core, and duality (*dubida*) dominates every phase of existence. The selfish ego asserts itself in opposition to others, through competition, malice, ill-will towards others, and a craving for power. Manumukhs conceal from themselves their actual relation to their existence. Ignoring their true self, they get caught up in artificialities and appearances.

In contrast, Gurmukhs are faced towards enlightenment (*guru*); they break through their selfish ego to a fuller realization. Their inner process of formation and cultivation is what Gadamer would call “*bildung*.” As they distance themselves from their egotistical self, the Gurmukhs open up a space in which they embrace others and acquire a sensibility for the universal (Gadamer 1989: 17). By recognizing that Truth, they take upon themselves its characteristics, and live authentically amongst their families and friends. Guru Arjan vividly describes how that Truth is reflected in their person: “Truth is in their hearts, Truth is on their lips, Truth is in their sight, Truth their form, Truth is their way, Truth their revelation. They who discern Truth, says Nanak, they themselves merge with Truth” (GG: 283). Similar to liberation theologians who claim that Truth is something that is *done*, the goal of Truth in Sikhism becomes the path itself. And so ethics and religion integrate into a singular venture, a life fully lived with the knowledge and experience of that universal One. Several facts of human existence come to the fore.

Social Equality

Since each and every being possesses the same Being, everybody on earth is the same. The crucial pan-Indian term *dharam* (used for religion, virtue, duty, propriety, morality, cosmic order, and law) acquires a whole new meaning in Sikhism. Though *dharam* retains its Sanskrit etymology (from the root *dhṛ*, to sustain, uphold, support—shared with *dharti* or earth), it does not carry any of the conventional regulations. *Dharam* in Sikhism does not prescribe the customary fourfold division of Indian society into Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras, nor does it institute a division of the stages of life into that of *brahmacarin*, *grahastha*, *vanaprastha*, and *sanyasin* (*varna-ashrama-dharma*). In contrast to the fourfold societal hierarchy and its corresponding privileges, duties, and responsibilities, Sikh scripture stipulates one and the same *dharam* for people of all classes, races, faiths, and ages. Guru Nanak categorically says that there is only one *dharam*: “*eko dharam*” (GG: 1188). The mutually exclusive scripts that had been enforced on people simply on the basis of their biological birth are obliterated. Everyone is equally impelled to perform responsible action throughout their entire life. Rejecting distinctions and restrictions, the Guru Granth declares that *dharam* succeeds “*sristi sabh ikk varan hoi*—when the entire earth becomes equal”—literally, one color (GG: 663). In fact: “*dharaṭ upai dhari dharamsal*—the earth was created to establish the home of *dharam*” (GG: 1033). In yet another explanation, “*gurmukh dharti sachai saji*—for the sake of good people, the earth was embellished by the One” (GG: 941). Such scriptural statements underscore the moral responsibility humans owe their singular creator. Everybody across the globe is *equally* obligated to work together to construct a better world. The Kshatriya is not obligated to take up arms for justice, nor the White Man to carry out *his burden*. In alignment with that One, social hegemonies and racial dominance are displaced. A memory of that singular matrix can promote constructive steps towards equality, healthcare, education, and caring for the environment in our own contemporary global community.

Positive attitudes to birth and being in this world

The temporal world is a part of the Infinite One and partakes of its characteristics. Therefore birth is good. Body is good. In the tissues of the Guru Granth we find many different terms used for the body—*tanu*, *deh*, *kaia*, *pind*, and in each case it is made up

of the Transcendent material. There is no Cartesian body–spirit division, for that One pours out of the pores of the flesh—male and female alike. A variety of nuances come together to underscore the epistemological and divine ingredients of the physical self. The true name that Guru Nanak enunciates in his Mul Mantra is but found in the body: “*tan sucha so akhiai jis mahi sachā nao*—that body is called pure, where dwells the true name” (GG: 19). Another scriptural verse celebrates our material bodies possessing all that is in the transcendent realm: “*jo brahmande soi pinde*—whatever is out there is here in the body” (GG: 695). The Guru even expresses his amazement at the spiritual richness of the body: “*merai kartai ikk banati banai isu dehi vici sabh vathu pai*—my creator performed a marvel, all treasures are deposited in this very body!” (GG: 1064). Importantly, the Guru Granth takes female genealogy seriously, and affirms the processes of menstruation, birth, lactation that feminist theologians, philosophers, and psychologists today find so critical. Against androcentric perceptions of a temporary “little oven in which the paternal gene was nurtured and cozily leavened” (Cavarero 1995: 74), Sikh scripture claims the womb (*garbh* or *udar*) as the “source of life” (GG: 74). Rather than an abstraction, the fetus is firmly lodged and reveals a palpable portion of infinity in which each of us from every species becomes embodied and exists authentically.

The cognition of the One fills individuals with confidence and inspires them to develop constructive relationships with the world around: “Amidst mother, father, brother, son, and wife, has the Divine yoked us,” states the Guru Granth (77). In these divinely bound relationships, every human relationship is vitally significant. Asceticism and renunciation from the world are denounced. Basic human activities are highly revered: “*hasandia khelandia painandia khavandia viche hovai mukt*—spiritual liberation is attained in the midst of laughing, playing, dressing up, and eating” (GG: 522). The horizon of the physical, which has been severed by the patriarchal metaphysical order in which death functions as the fundamental paradigm, is protected by the biological functions. Grace Jantzen has insightfully commented that the obsession with death is connected to an “obsession with female bodies, and the denial of death and efforts to master it are connected with a deep-seated misogyny” (Jantzen 1999: 132). For Jantzen, the various forms of dominance—racism, capitalism, colonialism, homophobia, ecological destruction—are manifestations of the need to conquer death.

The Sikh theistic vision flushes out the necrophilic imaginary: “You yourself are born of the egg, from the womb, from sweat, from earth: you yourself are all the continents and all the worlds” (GG: 604). Paradoxically, the birth-less Transcendent is co-present in the birth of every being in every single species! In a melody of phonetic sounds and a collage of visual images Guru Nanak brilliantly photographs a fetus in the womb: “Semen and blood came together to create the body . . . each breath remembers the true name, for inside the womb flourishes the One” (GG: 1026–7). The maternal power with her paradigm of natality overturns the male death-ideal as its fundamental paradigm. Indeed, “the womb of the mother earth yokes us together” (GG: 1021; Singh 2005: 152–7). Birth becomes the absolute possibility of orienting ourselves in the physical world so that we experience fully—body and spirit together—the Absolute within the natural and social fibers of our being.

Proximity of the Divine

The overall impulse is to experience the universal One within the latitudes and longitudes of daily life, and the Guru Granth reminds Sikhs of its proximity. By hearing

(*sunia*) the melodies, consciousness is raised and the Divine is accessed. Thus the sacred volume serves the role of the “Guru” foreshadowed in Nanak’s Mul Mantra. It constitutes the center of Sikh personal, social, and religious life. It is the presiding agent for ceremonies and rites of passage, and is treated with the highest respect and veneration. The Guru Granth is always draped in silks and brocades (called *rumala*), placed on quilted mats, and supported by cushions. A canopy hangs over it for protection, and a flywhisk is waved over it by an attendant. Such cultural symbols as the whisk and the canopy for royalty are used to express the sovereign status of the scriptural Guru. Men and women remove their shoes and cover their heads before they come into its presence. At home or in shrines, the volume is daily opened at dawn, and adorned in robes. This ceremony of opening the holy book is called *prakash*, “making the light manifest.” It is a ritual enactment of the transcendent Word being enthroned and ready to receive the public, and radiate its luminosity. In the evening the Guru Granth is ceremoniously folded together. This closing ritual is called *sukhasan*, the position (*asan*) of rest or comfort (*sukh*) for the night. The *sukhasan* performance parallels the morning *prakash*, and the two create the daily framework for congregations to attend to their sacred Book, which puts them in touch with the transcendent One.

Men and women communicate with the infinite One through *hukam* (order), also called *vak* (reading). It is obtained by opening the Guru Granth at random, and reading the passage on the top of the left-hand page. The passage is understood as a personal message from that utterly impersonal Being. Sikh shrines display the morning *hukam* on a board so that visitors during the course of the day can read it and interpret it for themselves. For any major decision or undertaking, Sikhs individually and collectively solicit the *hukam* for guidance and support. Thus the Transcendent is palpably available in their nitty-gritty affairs.

Sikh places of public worship are called *gurdwaras*. Architecturally they are designed on the open and inclusive pattern of the Harmandir, constructed by Guru Arjan. Its modern day version, the Golden Temple in the city of Amritsar, could even be seen as an architectural translation of Sikh theism. While it shares many features with mosques and temples, it discloses the unique Sikh perception of the Divine. In the Golden Temple there are Hindu *kalsas* just as there are Islamic domes. There are Hindu square pillars supporting the roofs just as there are Islamic arches (Spear 1994: 49). We find beautiful geometric patterns that decorate the Jama Masjid, just as we find the blooming lotuses afloat in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Central features of Islamic architecture (domes and minarets) and art (calligraphy, complex geometric designs, denaturalization, arabesques, and mirror-work) permeate the entire complex. Kanwarjit Kang observes how its main dome “is adumbrated like the double ceiling of the Islamic maqbara” (1977: 33). But in spite of the many similarities, the Golden Temple is its own distinctive space. Here, for instance, the utter feeling of submission to an omnipotent creator felt in the mosque is taken over by the feeling of elation. Fundamental aspects of mosques such as the *mihrab* (semicircular niche in the wall of a mosque that indicates the direction of the Ka’ba in Mecca) or the *minbar* (pulpit from which the Imam addresses the congregation), or the tombs of saints (especially popular in Sufi sacred spaces), are missing. Their absence indicates very different attitudes towards the Divine. Without any one direction to focus on, there is an emphasis that Sikhs be tuned in on the One in every direction, and that, too, on their own—without a mediator like the Imam. The absence of tombs spells out different notions of death and eschatology. The tomb at a Sufi shrine is saturated with the blessings (*baraka*) of the saint, as it marks the wedding (*urs*) between the saint

and God who are now enjoying an eternal relationship in paradise. Sikh sacred space shifts the attention from death and paradise to life here and now, and from the Sufi saint to the congregation (*sangat*): “*taha baikunthu jah kirtanu tera*—that place is paradise where we recite your praise” (GG: 749); “*jahan kirtanu sadhsangati rasu tah saghan bas falanad*—where the congregation (*sadhsangati*) relishes divine recitation, that place is auspicious, full of fragrance, fruit, and joy” (GG: 1204). Sensuous fragrances, tastes, and enjoyments are the result of divine praise resounding in the company of good people, which, geographically, could be anywhere, and at any time.

Nor is there anything particularly potent about the topology of the Golden Temple in the traditional Indian sense. Unlike Hindu temples, which are built at very specific places—“where the gods are seen at play”—the site for the Harmandir was not chosen for any specific reason. The idea for the pool within which Guru Arjan built the shrine goes back to the time of the third Guru Amar Das. The Gurdwara is not constructed on any traditional diagrammatic plans either. Guru Arjan did not avail himself of the highly elaborate Hindu science of architecture with its technical blueprints that secure a deity into the site. As the renowned art historian Stella Kramrisch observes: “Wherever a Hindu temple stands, whatever age witnessed its growth, and to whatever size, as house, body and substance for God (the Essence) to dwell in, it is built in principle on the same plan, the Vastupurushamandala” (Kramrisch 1976: 6). Since the Mandala is the ritual, diagrammatic form of the universal essence (*purusha*), which carries its bodily existence (*vastu*), each temple building becomes the substantial form of God. Quite the contrary, the Sikh shrine does not attempt to install the Divine into its structure. The landscape is not deified in any sense. The Gurdwara is simply a door (*dwara*) towards enlightenment (*guru*). The infinite One cannot be housed. It cannot be located anywhere. The transcendent word embodied by the Guru Granth remains the focal point of worship. There are no images or icons, nor is there any central chamber from which any male or female is excluded.

The Sikh theistic conception does flow into every aspect of life, even in ordinary gestures and habits. For example, when they meet one another or say goodbye, Sikhs join their hands together and say *Sat Sri Akal*. The Mul Mantra resonates in these daily greetings: the Absolute (*sat*) is evoked with its timeless attribute (*akal*), and by the honorific title (*sri*), that One is drawn into a most personal relationship. Thus every temporal meeting and parting—be it between family, friends, or a larger society—is endowed with the presence of the One. Similarly, their most frequent exclamation—*Waheguru* (before a meal, after a sneeze, and so on)—surges with a sense of wonder and echoes Guru Nanak’s awe (*wah!*) as he experienced the transcendent One in his veins and tendons here on earth.

Throughout Sikh scripture the timeless One is addressed in the second person *tun* (a familiar form of the word “you,” like the French *tu*), quite like the “I–Thou” encounter put forth by the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber. According to Buber the “I–thou” relation is one of subject to subject. This relationship governed by mutuality and reciprocity is opposed to the “I–it” relationship where the other exists merely as an object or a thing. When the individual is in an “I–Thou” relationship with God, then this universal relationship flows into all other relations. Certainly when there is only One Divine, human beings become aware of each other not as separate or isolated atoms but as having a unity of being. The individual reaches out to *others* as a Thou; feelings of respect, commitment, and responsibility naturally extend towards fellow beings and the world around.

Aesthetic

Western thinkers such as Baumgarten designate aesthetics as the science of sensuous knowledge, the object of which is beauty, in contrast with logic, the object of which is truth (Kockelmans 1985). Kierkegaard distinguished the separate realms of religion, ethics, and aesthetics, and designated aesthetics at the bottom rung. However, the crux of Sikh theism is an aesthetic experience of the One, and moral action is its automatic reflex. Thus hierarchies and divisions between religion, ethics, and aesthetics are dissolved. Opposite of anesthetic, the deadening of senses, aesthetics is the heightening of hearing, seeing, touching, smelling, tasting. Rather than “conceptualization” or “faith” or “belief,” the ultimate goal of Sikhism is a sensuous feel for that infinite One.


The method was inaugurated by the founder Guru himself: “*rasia hovai musk ka tab phul pachanai*—Only the relisher of fragrance can recognize the flower” (GG: 725). The complex process of recognition (*pachanai*) requires a physical act as well as a cognitive realization. Therefore, a heightened sensuous experience becomes the requisite for metaphysical knowledge. In another passage he explicitly says: “*akhi qudrat kani bani mukh akhan sach nam*—eyes must see the divine nature, ears must hear the divine word, lips must speak the true name” (GG: 1168). Through his aesthetic discourse, the first Sikh Guru tried to awaken his followers and revitalize their senses, psyche, imagination, and spirit. His entire teaching is in the poetic medium. He reveled in calling himself a poet: “*sasu masu sabhu jio tumara tu mai khara piara nanaku sairu eva kahatu hai sace parvadgara*—to you belong my breath, to you my flesh; says the poet Nanak, you the True One are my Beloved” (GG: 660). His identification as a poet *sairu/shair* comes from the Arabic word for poetry (*al-shi'r*). With its root in consciousness and knowledge, Nanak's understanding of poetry is very different from our view inherited from Plato, that of “making” or “crafting” (Nasr 1981: 12). Guru Nanak's breath and his flesh are totally consumed by his intense consciousness and love for the universal Being.

The important Indian aesthetic concept of *rasa* resonates richly in Sikh scripture. Basically meaning “juice” (of plants), *rasa* incorporates complex qualities and experiences common to food and arts. Since its influence in music, theater, and the arts was first discussed by Bharata in his *Natya Shastra* almost two millennia ago, *rasa* has generated elaborate theories on the refined essence of an object, its taste or flavor, the relishing by the taster, and a cultivated sensibility (Coomaraswamy 1957). Guru Nanak uses it to describe Being: “*ape rasia ape rasa ape ravanhar*—Itself the relisher, itself the *rasa*, it itself is the bestower” (GG: 23). That all-encompassing One is the primal cause and ultimate savorer! The Granth was compiled for the purpose of bringing transcendent joy to the community. Indeed Guru Arjan in his finale provides his rationale by means of an appetizing analogy: the sacred volume is a *thal* (large metal dish) holding the food of truth (*sat*), contentment (*santokh*), and reflection (*vicar*). The dishes made up of epistemological ingredients are not intellectually conceived or logically argued; rather, they are swallowed and digested by the body in the company of others. We find the conceptual knowledge of the Absolute (*sat*) flowing in two directions: coming inwards, it gathers joy and contentment for the individual (*santokh*, from the Sanskrit *sam*/together and *tush*/happy or content), and it spreads out towards others (*vicar* from the Sanskrit *vi*/out or spread and *c'ar*/go). By offering the Guru Granth as a platter, Guru Arjan stressed the sapiential quality of Being that is personally fulfilling and reflected upon in the company of others.

But as he goes on to stipulate, simple “eating” (*khavai*) is not enough: there has to be an aesthetic “savoring” (*bhuncai*). In the process of savoring, cognitive and sensuous

faculties are dynamically fused. The sense of sight was lauded by the ancient Vedic seers (*vid*/to see) as the supreme faculty, and judged as the “higher” sense by Plato and Kant (Korsmeyer 2002). Whereas sight retains a gap between the object of knowledge and the perceiving subject, the sense of taste overcomes any distance by intimately bringing the “other” into the very body of the percipient. For the Guru Granth poets, the oral is the aural. Guru Arjan equates language (*bani*) with ambrosia (*amrit*), and qualifies it as delicious essence (*amio rasa*; GG: 963). His use of *rasa* evokes the elemental nutrients of sacred poetry and, importantly, their awareness and appreciation. Thus the Guru brings about a shift from the object to the subject, from the divine word to its human reception, from knowing to savoring. Simply put, Sikh theism revolves around actualizing the transcendent One in the daily human acts of hearing, speaking, tasting, and so on.

The ultimate enjoyer is accessed in a plurality of rapturous sensations. After identifying Being as *rasa*, the relisher, and the provider of *rasa*, Guru Nanak in his memorable hymn set in Sri Rag (GG: 23) rejoices in the omnipresent Transcendent. His entire passage, exquisite in its imagery, is taut with energy. Here readers visualize that One as the bride in her wedding dress, as the groom on the nuptial bed, as the fisherman and the fish, as the waters and the trap, as the weight holding the net, as well as the lost ruby swallowed by the fish. With its continuous unfolding of contrasting images in rhythmic repetition, Guru Nanak offers myriad possibilities of recollecting that One. In a speedy tempo, his similes and paradoxes free readers from conventional codes. His literary tropes parallel natural phenomena: just as in nature new qualities can be engendered by the coming together of elements in new ways, so too new semantic juxtapositions and combinations can produce a new *isness* (Wheelwright 1962; Ricœur 1976: 68). Is the Divine the dressed-up bride or the groom on the nuptial bed? Breaking out of ordinary linear thought, Nanak’s language makes way for a new dimension of reality and being in this world. It does not allow the mind to halt anywhere. It is also noteworthy that nothing in the cosmos is polluted or deemed too low for that Being to sparkle through. Humans are not the only ones endowed with spiritual treasures—the fish has swallowed the ruby too!

By designating the Divine as numeral “1” Guru Nanak shattered the dominance of conventional motifs and divisive categories and inspired new ways of imagining. The prototypical Sikh space is designed to embrace that One. Naturally, the most ubiquitous visual Sikh symbol is  (*Ikk Oan Kar*). It is used extensively as a form of ornamentation in arts, crafts, and architecture. It can be seen on gateways, walls, and windows of homes, shrines, and shops. The image is elaborately inscribed in silk, marble, steel, and gold. It is embroidered on oxen covers and precious canopies; it is embossed on books and on earrings and pendants. Without confining the Divine in any way, the rhythmic unity sustained by the numeral “1,” the syllabic *oan*, and the unending geometric arc launches the spectator towards an all-encompassing infinity. Its inherent openness permeates Sikh art, and forges innovative patterns.

A memorable painting of Guru Nanak from the late nineteenth century (at the Government Museum and Art Gallery in Chandigarh) is a perfect visual representation of Sikh theism. The Guru has a full beard, a halo, a turban with a high flap and a domed top, and he wears a full-sleeved robe that is mesmerizing. One of the hagiographies recount Guru Nanak receiving a cloak of honor during his visit to Baghdad, with verses from the holy Quran embroidered on it (for details see Goswamy 2000: 3809). In the watercolor, tinted in a golden hue, the Guru’s robe is inscribed all over with calligraphy in Arabic characters in the *naksh* script. The Guru, deep in thought, with a rosary in his hands, is seated on a terrace. Some branches in brush strokes on the right echo his

profile. In the far background is an impressionist rendering of sizeable foliage. Closer, we get a glimpse of the Mughal styled balcony balustrade with latticework. Closer still is a big round pillow-cushion associated with emperors, and the Guru, with his left leg tucked under and the right one placed over the left knee, sits perfectly aligned with his royal backdrop. The rich horizontal folds of his pillow-cushion dynamically intersect with the vertical stripes of his pajama-trousers; the circular designs on his turban rhythmically repeat the circles on the pillow, the necklace around his neck, and the rosary in his right hand; the triangles decorated with yet more triangular florets on his draping shawl join the rectangular border of the carpet he is seated on. In this scene of perpetual motion, the Guru is wrapped in a robe spun with verses from the holy Quran and the sublime Jap that cover his entire front and sleeves. The Islamic invocation *bismillah al rahman al rahim* and his verse from the Jap hymn *adi sacu jugadi sacu hai bhi sacu hosi bhi sacu* appear together. The diverse threads of Guru Nanak's dress powerfully weave that One who is beyond all external designs and forms. In its visual hermeneutics, the work unravels not only the meaning of the term "text" (derived from *texere*, to weave), but also the singular transcendent matrix from which all the materials are born. The call for *rahimat* or *rahim* is the primordial womb of Truth (*adi sacu*), which always was (*jugadi sacu*), is (*hai bhi sacu*), and will be evermore (*hosi bhi sacu*). Without halting the mind anywhere, the painting gives a visual and sonorous push to imagine and intuit that infinite One, *Ikk Oan Kar*.

Conclusion

To sum it up, Sikh theism is a perpetual dialectic between the finite and the infinite, the particular and the universal, the physical and the metaphysical. It is not monotheistic as such because it does not construe a "God" above the cosmos. Nor does it envision a personal figure who descends into the world in any incarnation. It also differs from the Platonic perspective where pure ideas are divorced and distanced from the everyday phenomena that are seen and touched. For Plato, only the *is-ness*, the essence, the formlessness of the rose is real; the particular roses—those that can be seen, smelled, and touched—are but mutable, temporary, and unreal. In contrast, the universal Being in Sikhism highlights the particular. Form is Formless and vice versa. It is important that the dialectic is ever alive, for otherwise Sikh theism is misconstrued. And it is not a pantheistic view, because that One is not understood as actually residing within, or encapsulated inside a form. That One is vitally present in all time and space, without being contained in anything as such—and is equally available to each and all of us. To recognize and feel that singular Reality, and to act upon it, is our human obligation.

Related Topics

Chapter 2: Asian Philosophy; Chapter 5: Islam; Chapter 6: Hindu Theism; Chapter 35: Feminism; Chapter 36: Religious Diversity; Chapter 42: Architecture; Chapter 43: Aesthetics

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Recommended Reading

- Macauliffe, M. A. (1909) *The Sikh Religion: Its Gurus, Sacred Writings, and Authors*, Oxford: Clarendon Press. One of the earliest introductions to the Sikh religion, with translations from Sikh scripture.
- Mandair, A.-P. S. (2009) *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation*, New York: Columbia University Press. A provocative study of Sikh theism and its systematization under colonial influences.
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AFRICAN RELIGIONS

Segun Gbadegesin

In this chapter, I argue that there is a strong connection between theism and African religions. I maintain that African religions understand God as personal and that they affirm God's involvement in the world. However, I also argue that as there are varieties of African religions, from the Pharaohnic religions of African antiquity to the traditional religions of sub-Saharan Africa, to the Coptic and Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity of the north, and the Islamic and missionary Christian faiths, so also there are varieties of theistic beliefs across the African landscape. In all the varieties of African religions, however, the uniqueness of Africans is in their pragmatic approach to the matter of spirituality.

Africa

To get a handle on our topic, we must first try to clear a conceptual thicket by paying attention to the terms of the discourse: Africa, religion, and theism. This is, of course, a difficult task. How does one define Africa, for instance? Africa is a point on the map, a geographical expression. Africa is also a concept, with a meaning that resonates beyond its boundaries, and an idea that is embraced by millions of people. That idea could be a source of a sense of dispossession, or it could provide a sense of hope in the future. Africa is, of course, a political entity, an aggregation of states in various degrees of political development, still bogged down by biting poverty, sub-national crisis and sectarian strife (Mudimbe 1988).

Each of the foregoing approaches to defining Africa has its use, depending on the ultimate purpose of the discourse. But in a less empirical sense, Africa is something more than all of these. It is a spiritual entity that embraces more than a fair share of the world's spirituality. Africa is more Christian than the Holy See and discerning observers have identified what might be termed Reverse Evangelism, a phenomenon of Africans in the forefront of Christian evangelizing work in Europe and America. Africa is more Islamic than the Holy shrines of Mecca and Medina. And, of course, Africa is the land of a primeval traditional spirituality, the birthplace of the gods. In a sense, as Kwame Nkrumah surmised in *Consciencism* (1964), we may legitimately talk about the triple heritage of Africa: tradition, Islam, and Christianity. The question: "Which of the three heritages is most authentically African?" is indeed a difficult one as it raises the further tricky question of which Africa is most authentic. But how is such a question to be addressed satisfactorily? Is the African antiquity of the Pharaohs inauthentic? Or is there an authentic traditional Africa? What does the term "traditional" describe? Is "modern" Africa a product of foreign imposition? These are pertinent questions especially as we concern

ourselves with African religions. A saving grace, one that desirably limits our incursion into the depth of these questions, is that our topic is broad enough to deal with all facets of Africa and its religions. Were we to be limited to African “traditional” religions, it would be a conceptual muddle. For the question “What defines tradition?” becomes problematic. Is it indigenoussness? We’d be hard-pressed to conclude that Christianity in its Coptic variant or Islam is not indigenous to Africa. To avoid such a conceptual morass, we will approach the topic by focusing on the manifestations of religion in different epochs of Africa and examining the varieties of theistic doctrines and practices.

Religion

But first there is a need to come to grips with religion itself. What is it that is at the core of all its variants? This question is important in view of the fact that there have been arguments and counter-arguments about the status of African religions. It has been denied that Africans have a religious experience; it has also been argued that Africans are notoriously religious (Mbiti 1969). Obviously if both contentions appeal to the same notion of religion, at least one must be false. But what if they appeal to different notions of religion? Is there a way we could say that both still define religion? Does religion admit of relativity?

There is a core to religion, having to do with its source, its object and the attitude it invokes. One source of religion is a sense of vulnerability and dependence. I look at the immense space around me; I feel a sense of emptiness; I feel apprehensive; I feel vulnerable; and I need assurance. The sense of vulnerability naturally craves the presence of some power or powers stronger than me to lean on. This is a beginning of a religious experience. A second source of religion is a sense of wonder and awe that commends to us the idea of a being as the author of the universe who is worthy of our recognition and worship. A song writer communicates this sense of wonder in appropriate lyrics:

O Lord my God, how I in awesome wonder
 Consider all the works thy hand has done
 I see the stars/I hear the rolling thunder
 The universe thy holy hands hath made
 Then sings my soul/O Lord God to thee
 How great thou art
 How great thou art
 Then sings my soul/O Lord God to thee
 How great thou art
 How great thou art.

Appreciating the wonders of the universe, attributing its origin to the work of God, and therefore recognizing the greatness of God, even in the absence of either fear or a sense of vulnerability, is also a bona fide basis for religion.

Theism

Theism is constituted by belief in the existence of God, but it also includes the belief that God is the source and sustainer of all things, the belief that there is meaning to everything that is imposed by God, and the belief that the realization and fulfillment

of the ultimate meaning of all things is possible only through God. Theism affirms the reality of God and God's involvement in the world. While agnosticism is skeptical about the possibility of having knowledge of God, theism affirms the possibility of knowing God. While pantheism identifies God as the totality of the universe and inseparable from it, theism understands God not only as personal but also as transcending the world and being separate from it. Finally, while deism understands God as having no interaction with the world, theism affirms God's involvement with it.

The origin of theistic belief could be traced to the natural and primordial urge to locate in some being or beings the ultimate explanation for the reality that confronts us. The immensity of the local mountain, the expanse of the neighborhood river, even the density of the rain forest or the dryness of the desert, suggest that there must be a reality that underlies them, especially when such a reality appears to have a grip on one's being. It is in this sense that God serves as the meaning and purpose of all things. As such, the motivation for theistic belief is human, even if there could be differing levels of understanding of the idea of such an ultimate reality.

On one level of understanding, God might be seen as an abstract concept that is postulated only as an explanation of what there is ultimately, as most philosophical, as opposed to religious or theological, accounts of God assert. On a second level of understanding, God might be understood as a personal being in the sense that God is conceived of as having personal relationships with human beings, and participating in their affairs in a manner similar to ordinary human interactions. Here God is made in the image of human beings and, thus, as having properties that are only idealized forms of human traits. Polytheistic beliefs exemplify this level of understanding and a major difference exists between such beliefs and the monotheistic, Judeo-Christian belief in a God who is also personal but infinite. On this monotheistic conception of God, God is not only one and personal but also all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-benevolent.

Theism and Ancient Egyptian Religion

In the beginning, there was ancient Egypt, the cradle of civilization in the Nile delta. There was a constant flow of migrants to its rich agricultural farmlands from the southeastern, southwestern, and central parts of the expansive landmass of which it formed a small part. And towards the declining years of its glorious reign, it sent migrants to other parts of that same landmass seeking refuge and sustenance in the south, east, and west. In this intricate nexus of movements, it is not only economic activities that get transported. The exchange of ideas and concepts is an inevitable aspect of the story. Thus the story of ancient Egypt, including the uniqueness of its religious encounter, is integrally linked with the story of the rest of Africa.

Views of Ancient Egyptian Religion

Interpretations of ancient Egyptian views of God vary between monotheistic and polytheistic, with prominent Egyptologists on both sides of the debate. In *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many*, Erik Hornung analyzes some of the body of knowledge on ancient Egyptian religion before arriving at his own account (Hornung 1982). He cites a number of nineteenth-century scholars, such as the pioneer Egyptologist Emmanuel de Rouge, Le Page Renouf, and Heinrich Brugsch, all of whom argued that the monotheism of ancient Egyptian religion was primeval, not a recent

development. For instance, Renouf claimed that “[i]t is incontestably true that the sublime portions of the Egyptian religion are not the comparatively late result of a process of development or elimination from the grosser. The sublime portions are demonstrably ancient” (Hornung 1982: 19).

But there were also polytheistic interpretations of ancient Egyptian religion. Thus in 1888 Gaston Maspero argued that “the Egyptians were first of all polytheists, and . . . if they arrived at the conception of a single deity, that deity was not exclusive or jealous” (ibid.: 22). And Hornung notes that Maspero was not alone in holding this view. After reviewing the evidence Hornung concludes that further discoveries, including Pyramid Texts and excavations in the 1890s, failed to support a monotheistic interpretation of ancient Egyptian religion and provided “only evidence of a multiplicity of deities” (ibid.: 24).

What is the truth about ancient Egyptian religion? Was it monotheistic or polytheistic? Can we answer this question linguistically? Even this approach has its difficulties. *Ntr* was the Egyptian word for God, but did the Egyptians mean by it what the Coptic Christians later meant when they took over that word as their term for God? Or was it this Coptic take-over of the word that signaled the beginning of the monotheistic origin of the Egyptian notion of God? This issue here is similar to that involved in the polemic of Okot p'Bitek against Christian missionaries whom he accused of appropriating African words for specific deities as the equivalent of the Christian God, without a proper understanding of what those words meant in their traditional contexts (p'Bitek 1970). But assume *ntr* truly referred to the Egyptian notion of God. Then it might show that Egyptians were monotheists. Hornung also observes, however, that the plural form of *ntr*, *ntrw*, was commonly used in ancient Egypt and that “it refers either to a limited number of gods (the gods of a place or a country, or a group of gods) or to the virtually unlimited totality of all gods” (Hornung 1982: 43). In other words, while the use of the singular *ntr* might point to monotheism, the use of the plural *ntrw* might signal polytheism. One can argue, however, that the fact that *ntr* can be pluralized at all, indicates a stronger case for the proponents of polytheism.

How about using the personal names of Egyptians to determine the monotheism or polytheism of their belief system? As in Yoruba traditional religious thought in Nigeria, Egyptian names reflected their belief in God or gods. Hornung cites a collection of personal names from the period between 3000 and 2600 BCE: for example, *Jrj-ntr*: whom God created; *Jht-ntr*: whom God saves, both of which could be evidence of a belief in one abstract God that is not particular to a locality, and which may therefore be evidence of a monotheistic belief. But there are also references to personal names that suggest belief in particular gods: *Jnd-n-Hnm*: whom Khnum has saved, referring here to the god Khnum. So we might conclude that there is a belief in one abstract or absolute God just as there are beliefs in other particular gods. This might be similar again to the Yoruba, where, for instance, Olubunmi means “God gives me this,” and Sangobunmi means “Sango, (a specific deity) gives me this,” recognizing both the Supreme Being and the lesser deity, Sango. Hornung does not appear to accept this interpretation because he thinks that the same characteristics (for instance, making provisions for humans) which are attributed to the Supreme Being are also attributed to the lesser deity and this does not suggest a substantial difference that would warrant recognizing one as supreme and the other as lesser: “the characteristics and capacities of *ntr* are not, so far as can be discovered from the personal names, different from those of the individual deities so that one cannot find here an anonymous ‘high god’ behind the deities” (Hornung 1982: 47).

If the foregoing suggests that Ancient Egyptians were polytheists, there is also evidence of an original monotheism in their belief system, specifically in the cosmogonic myth of origin. The creator god Atum is the “undifferentiated one” who came into being without being created, generated the first divine couple, Shu and Tefnut, without copulation, and then procreated the next pair, Geb and Nut, who in turn procreated the next generation of gods, Osiris, Isis, Seth, and Nephthys. This was how the one became many. Hornung concludes that “the monotheism of the Egyptians consists in the belief that in the beginning the divine was one, and that in the cosmogony that was the work of the one, the one became many” (Hornung 1992: 45).

Theism and Traditional African Religions

As in ancient Egypt, belief in the one and the many is characteristic of religion in the rest of Africa. To demonstrate this point, we will look at the special case of the Yoruba of Nigeria, about which there has also been an ongoing debate over the question of the belief in a supreme deity.

The Yoruba cosmos has two realms of existence—the physical and the spiritual—with remarkable interaction between the two. Because the two realms appear to lie on a continuum that is believed to be seamless, it has been suggested that there is really no distinction between the two realms. While the physical realm is supposedly populated by human beings and other natural or physical entities, the spiritual realm is composed of deities, deified ancestors, and other spirit-beings. There are two categories of deities identified according to their perceived superiority in the order of the universe. On the higher level of superiority is Olodumare, who is considered in most accounts, especially those of missionaries and early anthropologists, as the Supreme Deity comparable to the Christian God, Jewish Yahweh, or Islamic Allah (Lucas 1948). Recent investigations have, however, revealed the inadequacy of such accounts. While Olodumare occupies a pre-eminent position in Yoruba traditional religious thought, it is true that Olodumare is not identical with any of the Gods of Abrahamic religions. This should not be a surprise. Particular conceptions of the deity are a function of a people’s understandings of their world and the apprehension they bring into it. These conceptions and understandings are based on different people’s experiences and are most likely going to yield different conclusions concerning the nature of God and/or gods. Thus while the Christian and Jewish Gods are all-powerful and all-knowing, the Yoruba Olodumare, though endowed with enormous powers *vis-à-vis* other divinities, is not traditionally construed as omnipotent or omniscient. This accounts for the acknowledgment of other divinities occupying the same level of superior authority as Olodumare in the hierarchy of existence (Abimbola 2006). These other divinities include Orunmila or Ifa, who is the god of wisdom and knowledge, Obatala, the god of moral purity, and Esu, the deity in charge of order and balance. Between these, there appears to be a division of labor and mutual respect.

The resolution of the problem of the one and the many in the ancient Egyptian conception of the gods is also not available to the Yoruba. Olodumare is pre-eminent not in the sense of being the one that became many. Rather Olodumare has always been with three other deities in the pantheon: Orunmila or Ifa, Obatala, and Esu. While Olodumare is credited with the supply of the critical breathing spirit that brings consciousness to the created human being, Obatala is credited with the making of the physical body, and Orunmila is the all-knowing deity who has the clue to the destiny that each human

being brings into the world. Remarkably, Olodumare grants or imposes the words of destiny on humans. But because of the remoteness of Olodumare from human beings, Orunmila, who is witness to the choice or imposition of destiny, is the one consulted to solve the riddle of personal destiny.

The pre-eminence of Olodumare is due to the respect accorded it, in virtue of its leadership capacity, by the other divinities in the top hierarchy of the Yoruba pantheon. Mythologized thinking has accounts of the origin of Olodumare's pre-eminence. In one account, the divinities had protested the authority of Olodumare in respect of the governance of the universe and had demanded his withdrawal so they, too, could make an attempt at ruling. Not being in the mood for argument, Olodumare suggested to them that they first attempt governance of the earth for 16 days while he withdrew. They agreed and went away rejoicing over the authority they had just won. But after Olodumare withdrew attention and forfeited the benefits and advantages of overseeing the activities of the earth, the divinities were not able to provide rain, sun, or warmth and life became nasty and unbearable. It was only after they showed remorse, confessed their folly, and acknowledged the absolute sovereignty and supremacy of Olodumare that Olodumare opened the gates of heaven, which allowed rain to fall on the earth and seeds to germinate for humans and animals to feed upon. This myth suggests that the Yoruba believe that Olodumare is supreme over all other divinities.

However, along with the belief in Olodumare's supremacy, there is also a belief that on occasion Olodumare has to acknowledge and respect the authority of other divinities in their different spheres. Thus Olodumare once consulted Orunmila, the god of wisdom, about how to attain immortality (Gbadegesin 1991). Esu, the god of order and balance, is credited with the power to establish order through a clever reconciliation of the forces of good and evil. Having the custody of *ase*, the divine authority, Esu is in a position, even without further permission from Olodumare, to effect changes in the fortunes of human beings. This means that each of these divinities has a direct relationship with human beings as custodians of what they need to prosper, and Olodumare is therefore largely irrelevant in this regard. This explains why there are hardly any temples, liturgies or rituals that target Olodumare in worship and there is no cult of Olodumare in most parts of Yorubaland.

Is this a monotheistic or polytheistic system of belief? To the extent that the Yoruba religious vocabulary and practice recognize the independent existence and essential functioning of a multiplicity of gods and goddesses in its pantheon, it is legitimate to refer to their system of belief as polytheism. Acknowledging a Supreme Being does not undermine the polytheistic nature of a belief as long as the supremacy of the Supreme Being does not preclude the existence of other divinities. For the Yoruba, this is not only the case but it is also recognized that these other divinities are supreme in certain areas of their activities, and at least three of them exist as colleagues of Olodumare who is only first among equals. This structure can be represented as follows:

Level 1: Olodumare, Obatala, Ifa (Orunmila) and Esu

Spirit world

Level 2: Other divinities (Oshun, Ogun, Yemoja, etc.)

Level 3: The ancestors

Physical world

Level 4: Humans, Animals

Level 5: Plants

On the first level represented in the diagram, which is above both the spirit world and the physical world, there are Olodumare (the Supreme Being), Obatala (the arch divinity), Ifa or Orunmila (the god of wisdom) and Esu (the god of order and balance). The four are regarded as the principal deities, and while Olodumare is considered as the Supreme Being, this only means being first among equals. Each of the other three in the first level has specific areas of authority.

On the second level, which is within the spirit world, there are other lesser gods, including Oshun (the goddess of fertility), Ogun (the god of metals), and Yemoja (the goddess of the sea). While these also play significant roles in their areas of authority, they derive their power and being from Olodumare, the Supreme Being. The third level, also within the spirit world, is occupied by ancestors who, though once humans, after death acquired spiritual powers to influence the fortunes of their descendants on earth. Even though ancestors must be human before they become ancestors, they occupy a place in the spirit world along with other spirit-beings and, as such, are recognized as having powers beyond normal human powers. The fourth and fifth levels are the realm of the physical world, and it is here that humans, animals, and plants are found.

Some scholars have tried to resolve the question of monotheism and polytheism by an appeal to the notions of ultimacy and concreteness. Newell S. Booth suggests, for instance, that there “can never be an absolute polytheism or an absolute monotheism, for concepts of the divine must include both concreteness and ultimacy” (Booth 1977: 177). Booth then observes that the Yoruba and Fon tend towards an emphasis on “concreteness, on the divine as available to man” (*ibid.*). This view recognizes adequately the functional, indeed pragmatic approach of the Yoruba to religion and other life issues. But where does the other arm of Booth’s reconciliation—ultimacy—come from? He suggests that “there is (yet) recognition of an ultimate which transcends man, expressed in the ‘Supreme God,’ Olodumare (Yoruba) or Mawu (Fon)” (*ibid.*). I think this might be overstretched. It appears to me that as far as the Yoruba are concerned, the tendency is always towards the concrete and pragmatic. They want and seek solutions to the concrete problems of life for which the divinities are handy. If the problems transcend human understanding, naturally the solutions must be sought beyond the realm of humans. The Supreme God is not sought because it merely transcends “man,” as Booth also acknowledges. Even here (in recognizing an ultimate) “there are elements of concreteness” (*ibid.*). The Yoruba conceptualization of its religious-spiritual universe is more like the structure of its social world. There are lineage heads, compound heads, village heads, and the supreme head of the kingdom, who is not only remote from the grass-root but is also only first among equals in the political structure at the center. Just as we do not speak of absolute monarchy even when our focus is on the Alafin, so we cannot speak of monotheism just by focusing on Olodumare. Geoffrey Parrinder captures this idea better when he suggests that the religion of the Yoruba and other parts of West Africa “may be best understood by the student, and not inaccurately described, if it is roundly called ‘polytheism’” (Parrinder 1970). He goes on to observe, accurately in my judgment, that “these gods are just as truly conceived as personal, supernatural, and ubiquitous beings as were the gods of ancient Egypt and many of modern India” (*ibid.*: 11).

Beside the monotheism–polytheism divide, there is another interesting issue with regard to the theistic characterization of African traditional religion. The theistic hypothesis postulates certain attributes of God as benevolent, all-knowing, and all-powerful, the combined force of which raises the traditional problem of evil. However, these attributes are not part of the essential understanding of God in the African milieu.

As has been seen with regard to the Yoruba, even, Olodumare or Olorun, the acknowledged High God of the Yoruba, is not credited with omnipotence or omniscience. As such the problem of evil is only a pseudo problem in Yoruba traditional religion. Of course, one might query the conceivability of the concept of a Supreme God that is denied the attribute of omnipotence or omniscience. Ghanaian philosopher, Kwasi Wiredu, who has written extensively on Akan cultural philosophy, sees no philosophical quandary in the idea of a Supreme Being that is denied omnipotence or omniscience as it might just be one of those "sensitive areas of thought" in which "there are some very deep disparities among the different tribes of humankind in regard to their modes of conceptualization" (Wiredu 1990: 85). This implies that deep disparities among different human groups in modes of conceptualization are normal. Indeed, according to Wiredu, it might just be that the Akan concept of a less than omnipotent God is more logical than the Christian conception.

Writing on the Akan belief, Wiredu identifies the key features of the Akan concept of God. The Akan word for the Supreme Being is *Onyame* or *Onyankopon*, meaning "That Than Which a Greater Cannot Be Conceived." As can be seen, this name suggests a great deal of power but not omnipotence. For "That Than Which a Greater Cannot Be Conceived" could still lack omnipotence or omniscience. Furthermore, while the "Christian God is a creator of the world out of nothing," the "Akan Supreme Being is a kind of cosmic architect, a fashioner of the world order, who occupies the apex of the same hierarchy of being which accommodates . . . the ancestors and living mortals, and . . . animals, plants, and inanimate objects" (Wiredu 1990: 91). That is to say, the Creator is part of a world of humans and inanimate objects from which it follows that the Creator neither operates in a supernatural realm nor is omnipotent. The Akan say: "The Creator created Death and Death killed the Creator." The point then is that for the Akan even the Supreme Being is not exempted from the laws of logic.

What the foregoing accounts of the Yoruba and Akan concepts of God and gods demonstrate is that religion and religiosity for Africans generally has to do with utility, as an instrument for the realization of well-being for oneself and one's family. The gods are given their due respect because of the belief that they have the power to deliver on the assumed promise of protection and prosperity. As long as this is the case, all is well between devotee and god or goddess. But should there be a break of covenant and the devotee suffers hardship, such a god or goddess cannot expect further devotion. In addition to the specialized functions attributed to them, the possibility of gods dying might also explain the occurrence of a plurality of deities, with a new god taking the place of an old god that suffers extinction because of withdrawal of attention by unsatisfied devotees.

It is worth noting that Wiredu goes beyond spelling out these points of divergence between Western and Akan conceptions of the Supreme Being and other gods. He, like Okot p'Bitek writing on the Luo of Kenya, offers a complete reconstruction of Akan religious and cultural sensibilities (p'Bitek 1970). Thus, for instance, in light of his analysis of the concept of religion and what it warrants, including the attitude to worship and reverence, Wiredu concludes that the term is inapplicable to the Akan because they do not adopt these attitudes to their gods and goddesses. I am not sure how successful this attempt is because it is unclear to me that one must have a one-size-fits-all definition of religion or spirituality. The fact that it makes sense to talk of a utilitarian or instrumental conception of religion itself suggests that it is a coherent notion, albeit a broadened concept compared to that of traditional usage.

Theism and Coptic Christianity

The homogeneity of ancient Egyptian demographics gave way to a diverse mix of peoples. Under Roman rule, there were Greeks, Jews, and Egyptians. In the first century following the death of Jesus Christ, Christianity entered Africa from Alexandria through the work of John Mark, one of the Disciples of Christ, and the author of the Gospel of Mark (Meinardus 2002). Prior to Mark's presence in Africa, Egyptian religion was (as we saw above) a version of theism with a belief in God and in gods. Egyptian Copts, like other Christians, are monotheists, believing in the supremacy of God and in Christ. However, Copts hold the distinctive Christological view that Christ has one nature which is the product of a fusion of the human and divine natures. Orthodox Christian belief (as defined by the Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon) held that the two natures remained distinct in the one person of Christ. As a result of this difference of belief, the Copts were persecuted during the Roman rule over Egypt, and when the Romans were conquered by the Arabs around 639 AD the Copts suffered further persecution and a severe loss of membership to Islamic conversions. There are still Coptic Christians in Egypt and it is on the basis of their long history that some would argue that Christianity is as African as traditional African religions.

Theism and African Islam

Islam crossed from the Arabian peninsula to North Africa right after the death of the Prophet Mohammed, and thus Africa was the first geographical area beyond Arabia to be exposed to Islam. This means that Islam could lay a good claim to being an indigenous African religion.

But apart from its history, what is crucial to our interest is the linkage, if any, between Islam and theism on the one hand, and other African religious traditions on the other. The monotheism of Islam is absolute. The doctrine of the oneness of God, encapsulated in the *Tawhid*, insists that Allah is one and is indivisible, and rejects the concept of the Trinity, which is a pivotal aspect of Christian belief. Though Islam insists on the oneness and indivisibility of God, in practice it appears to have accommodated the African belief in the efficacy of spirit forces and mystical powers. Arab proselytizers often travelled with their talisman and protective spiritual gear, converting with one hand and offering magical protection with the other. This syncretistic approach, which appears to legitimize traditional African practices of seeking favor with the spirit world, eased the entry of Islam into the African religious universe. Compared with the Christian condemnation of occult practices, Islam's accommodation of even the practice of divination in its various forms marked it out as uniquely suited to the African tradition. Of course, we must not here think of the relationship as entirely rosy. Islamic teachers could be uncompromising in their belief that the Kaffir (that is, unbelievers) cannot be tolerated, and stories are still told of the Jihadist onslaught in Northern Nigeria when, in the nineteenth century, the Fulani sacked the Hausa kingdoms and destroyed their idols.

Theism and African Christianity

As noted above, Christianity in its Coptic variant is as authentically African as traditional religions. Indeed, Coptic Christianity predated the acceptance of Christianity in

some Western European nations. So did the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. Despite this early history, however, Christianity lost out to Islam in Egypt and other nations of North Africa as a result of the aggressive proselytization by Arabs and their Fulani converts. In the fifteenth century, Christianity re-emerged as a significant movement through the efforts of Portuguese traders along the coast of Africa. However, it was not until the early part of the nineteenth century that Western missionary Christianity found its way to the interior of Africa south of the Sahara, through the activities of the abolitionists and former slaves.

It is not my task here to recount the history of Christian evangelization of Africa but, rather, to underscore one important point. While the Christian God of the missionaries was in many respects at variance with the idea of God and the Supreme Being as understood by traditional Africans, it was precisely the traditional African conception of God in particular and of religion in general that facilitated the work of the missionaries. The fact that, for Africans, religion is a matter of utility, that the gods are there to serve human goals, and that these gods are not envious, makes it possible for them to accept the Christian God as just another deity with whom they can develop a relationship for the purpose of warding off evil and promoting individual and family welfare. For many of the early converts, then, the idea of abandoning their traditional gods and goddesses did not suggest itself as necessary or desirable, since the gods have their specialties. Indeed, there were songs and witty sayings on this issue, one of which is: "we will observe our traditions! Christianity does not mean that we have to abandon our traditions." This is why the same percentage of people can claim to be Christians and Muslims on the one hand, and traditional believers on the other (Booth 1977: 159–60).

There is a difference between the fundamental humanism or human-centeredness of African traditional religions and the Christian emphasis on salvation by grace. A traditional Yoruba believer respects and serves his or her gods so they can benefit him or her. He or she, like the ancient Egyptian, does good work and avoids mistreating others so he or she can have an easy passage to the world of the dead. Good works are, for the traditional believer, requisite for his or her final end. For the Christian, while good work is important, it does not save; only grace through belief in Christ does.

It is also noteworthy that the translation of the Christian concept of God as omnipotent and omniscient into African languages ended up being incorporated into the liturgies and rituals of African traditional religions as well. What resulted was the introduction into these religions of notions that did not make sense. For instance, Olodumare, the traditional Yoruba Supreme Being, was appropriated by Christian missionaries as the Christian's Supreme Being and accorded the requisite descriptions of the latter. It turned out that this was a misappropriation. For while the Supreme Being of Christianity is all-knowing, Olodumare, the Supreme Being of the Yoruba, is not. So if the Christian God is "*arinu rode, olumo okan*" (one who sees inside out and knows the details of the human heart), Olodumare is not credited with this quality. What such a translation does then is to superimpose the conception of God from one religion onto that of another, leading to an inadvertent expansion of the traditional concept of Olodumare. Still that expansion might have little or no effect on the traditional concept itself. For the Yoruba polytheistic traditional religion does not prioritize Olodumare as an object of worship and, in many cases, both the primeval and lesser divinities (*orisa*) have greater relevance than Olodumare to the lives of their devotees.

Conclusion

African religions are as diverse as the cultures and geographies of Africa. Therefore, the gods that populate the African religious universe are, naturally, a motley crowd. Among them are the one and the many of ancient Egypt, the Trinity of the Copts, the divinities of traditional Africa, the Almighty Allah of Islam, and the Supreme God of missionary Christianity. The sociology of traditional Africa, including its communal structure and the interactions that it made possible, facilitated the people's sense of obligation to one another and to the gods identified with the land. The communal outlook on life prevented a cut-throat economic competition, but it did something else: it enhanced the spirituality of the African person without creating any serious conflict. African traditional religions are non-proselytizing, and because of this character, the violence associated with the spread of Islam and Christianity was alien to traditional Africa. The gods of Africa are not envious gods. It is a cruel irony of life that this same character of the traditional gods that eased the entry of the Abrahamic religions into the continent also led to their apparent decline, because the religions they gladly accepted were not guests for long. Moreover, the understanding of power and life-force that is associated with traditional religion proved difficult to abandon. Thus, a majority of Christian converts are reluctant to let this power go just because they are now assured of God's grace. To this day, stories are told of Christian preachers who solicit help from the *Babalawo* (divination priests) in order to ward off evil or to attract more members to their churches. Ordinarily, then, while it appears that the traditional religions have lost out to the invading forces of the new religions and their gods, the truth of the matter is more complex, and there is a continuous mixture of old and new, of the one and the many, a tribute to the pragmatic nature of Africans and their approach to spirituality.

Related Topics

Chapter 4: Christianity; Chapter 5: Islam; Chapter 9: New Religious Movements; Chapter 36: Religious Diversity; Chapter 37: Globalization; Chapter 48: Community

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Recommended Reading

- Idowu, E. B. (1975) *African Traditional Religion*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis. The most substantial contribution of this book is the author's treatment of the nature of God in African religion, defending the view that Africans are fundamentally monotheists in spite of their belief in divinities alongside a Supreme Being.
- Lucas, J. O. (1948) *The Religion of the Yoruba*, London: C. M. S. Bookshop. Though this book focuses on the religion of a specific ethnic nationality in Africa, what makes it interesting and useful for further reading is the connection it draws between ancient Egypt and modern Africa via the Yoruba traditional religion.
- Mbiti, J. S. (1991) *Introduction to African Religion*, London: Heinemann Educational Books. This is a basic introduction to the philosophical and religious beliefs of African peoples from the perspective of one of the leading experts in African religion.
- p'Bitek, O. (1970) *African Religions in Western Scholarship*, Nairobi: East African Literature Bureau. This little book by the late famous Ugandan poet and anthropologist, Okot p'Bitek, is an indictment of a good number of Western writers' misunderstanding of African religions.

NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

Peter B. Clarke

This discussion of theism and New Religious Movements (henceforth: NRMs) is loosely organized around the following themes: defining an NRM for the purpose of showing in what sense, if any, notions of theism found in NRMs are new; the global dimension and syncretistic nature of the NRM phenomenon; case studies of theism and NRMs with special reference to African, Indian and Japanese NRMs, the New Age Movement (henceforth: NAM) and the Self-religions. Also discussed, albeit briefly, is how the Constitution of a country (in this case Indonesia) can determine a religion's position regarding theism.

Defining an NRM

NRMs vary greatly, making them difficult to define. Some NRMs are theistic or show traces of theism while others are anti-theistic in the sense of being opposed to what they see as the monotheistic idea of God found in Judaism, Islam and Christianity. Ch'ondogyo is an example of the Korean NRM that rejects the Christian notion of God which, it claims, separates God from humanity, whereas S/He as the "Great Totality" is innate in human beings, and the "Great I" to which everyone should aspire (Clarke 2006a: 340). A different kind of criticism of Christian and Islamic teaching on God comes from an African (Nigerian) NRM known as *Godianism*, which claims that the Traditional religions of Africa are not polytheistic, as Christian missionaries claimed, but monotheistic (Turner 1991: 188; Dovlo 2006: 218–20). Earlier, anthropologists and linguists, among them Andrew Lang (1844–1912) and Wilhelm Schmidt (1868–1954), had gone further than Godianism by arguing that religion began with monotheism not polytheism (see Schmidt's *The Origin and Growth of Religion*, 1971). In advancing this theory they were discrediting the opinions of evolutionary ethnologists and social anthropologists such as Tylor (1832–1917), Frazer (1854–1941), Durkheim (1858–1917), and philosophers such as Hume (1711–76)—(see Hume's *Natural History of Religion* (2008 [1757]))—who held the opposite view, maintaining that "primitive" societies progressed through various stages of totemism, animism, fetishism, polytheism, and the like, to monotheism.

Not only are NRMs many and diverse but some refuse to be defined as a religion, a term that carries negative connotations in a number of cultures. NRMs that object to

being labeled a religion can, however, be told by the Courts that they are *de jure* religions. In the United States District Court at Newark New Jersey (February 25, 1976) against Transcendental Meditation (TM) (also known as the Science of Creative Intelligence) this NRM argued that it was a secular and scientific movement with no claim to being religious. This notwithstanding, the Court reached the verdict that TM's teachings were, in its opinion, religious in nature and could not, therefore, be taught in schools since this would be a violation of the first amendment of the United States Constitution (Spiritual Counterfeits Project TM in Court 1978). Other NRMs, including a number of the Japanese NRMs in Brazil such as Seicho no Ie (House of Growth) neither affirm nor deny their religious nature, leaving it to members to decide whether or not they wish to be counted as theists or agnostics or atheists, and if they believe in a God or god it is for them to decide what this means (Clarke 2006a: 310). In many cases of Japanese NRMs that I am familiar with the word *God* is used, when some other concept such as Nature would be more suitable, to translate for the non-member the movement's particular notion of the transcendent or of ultimate reality.

The diversity of NRMs is on such a scale that it led Bryan Wilson (1982) to conclude that it is not possible to reach an adequate definition of the phenomenon. Diversity thrives even within what is a relatively homogeneous religious and cultural context such as that of Japan. Here indigenous NRMs themselves are distinguished from each other by the use of the terms "new religions" (Japanese: *shin shukyo*) and "new, new religions" (Japanese: *shin shin shukyo*). The further question then arises: how new, or new, new are these religions? Earhart (1989) maintains that most Japanese NRMs have strong links with the old and/or historic religions of Japan, that is, with Shinto, or Mahayana, or Shingon or Nichiren Buddhism, or all of these. The well-known and most successful of Japanese NRMs, the lay movement known as Soka Gakkai (Value-Creation Society), which started in the 1920s, belongs squarely in the Nichiren Buddhist tradition which itself began in the thirteenth century.

The same question must also be asked of Indian derived NRMs: to what extent are movements such as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), better known as Hare Krishna, new? Hare Krishna beliefs and practices are deeply rooted in Indian religious history. The same point can be made with regard to the Rastafarian movement which has deep African roots, as well as to the Korean NRM the Unification Church—also known as the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity, and more widely, despite protests from the leadership, as the Moonies. This movement's theology is based on a variety of "old" sources including the Old and New Testament and Korean Traditional Religion (Chryssides 1991).

The diversity of NRMs notwithstanding, Wallis (1984), following Wilson's approach to the construction of a typology of NRMs (1970), arranged them into three types, not according to their content or beliefs but, rather, in terms of their response to the world. Using this criterion Wallis suggested that NRMs could be placed in one of the following three categories: world-affirming, world-denying and world-indifferent movements. One serious difficulty with this classification is that the same NRM can and often does display two or all three approaches to the world.

I have suggested elsewhere (Clarke 2006a) that several NRMs such as the previously mentioned Soka Gakkai movement, categorized by Wallis as world-affirming, would be better described as world-transforming movements, and that the category of world-indifferent movements appears to be largely redundant. A movement might seem to be indifferent or to lack any concern for politics and for the world but the appearance might

well be deceptive as in the case of the Sufi or Muslim mystical movements of Islam such as the Sanusi brotherhood of Cyrenaica (Evans-Pritchard 1949). Such movements have often played a vital role in political struggles whether these have been anti-colonial struggles or struggles against corrupt and undemocratic governments.

An easier but also problematic approach to defining what constitutes an NRM would be to use the term in an historical sense. One of the difficulties with this kind of definition is where to begin. Regarding Indian NRMs, it would seem appropriate to start in the first half of the nineteenth century and the same holds for Japan, while the starting point in Africa would be later (Clarke 2006a). NRMs are not only influenced by the older and/or historic mainstream religions, as we have seen, but can also greatly influence each other. One of the more influential Japanese NRMs, Ōmoto (Great Origin), was founded in 1892 by Deguchi Nao (1836–1918), wife of a poor carpenter. This movement's teachings went on to shape the thinking and practices of later NRMs, among them Seicho no Ie (House of Growth) (1930), Sekai Kyusei Kyo (loosely translated as Church of World Messianity) (1950) and Mahikari (1960).

Despite its limitations the least problematic approach to defining NRMs would appear to be to define them in an historical sense to cover all those movements that began to emerge from the first half of the nineteenth century. There will be exceptions to this ground rule, and moreover, rather than having a single historical period it might be useful to divide it up so that we can speak of early (nineteenth century), middle (first half of the twentieth century) and recent NRMs (from c.1950 to the present).

NRMs as Global and Syncretistic

Few religions, whether they are called old and/or historic or “new,” as they move beyond their original culture and place of origin and seek to establish themselves in other lands and cultures remain unchanged either in terms of their content or practices. Most take on some of the more popular beliefs and practices of the mainstream religion(s) of the host society. Thus, we find Brazil NRMs, of Shinto/Buddhist origin from Japan, using the term “God” in a Christian monotheistic sense, teaching about Jesus, reverencing Mary his mother, speaking of the caring and compassionate bodhisattva Kannon as Mary, and reciting at certain services the central Christian prayer, the Our Father (Clarke 2006b), all in order not to appear too “foreign.” As Stark (1996) pointed out, some degree of cultural continuity is a *sine qua non* of success for an NRM that attempts to establish itself in a culture with a different religious tradition from its own. Geertz (1968) made a similar point in his classic account of the development of Islam in Morocco and Indonesia where he pointed out that to under-adapt is to die, and to over-adapt results in the same fate.

NRMs that have failed to adapt to their host society rarely, if ever, grow beyond a few hundred members most of whom are likely to be of the same ethnic background as the religion itself, and this is the story of most Japanese NRMs in the United States and Europe (Clarke 2006a). In the case of those NRMs that do adapt there is sometimes a shift in belief from some form of non-theistic view of the “deity” to monotheism. The reasons for such a shift can include the desire for legal recognition and charitable status. In most cases, such a shift does not involve, at the subjective level, the abandoning of traditional notions of God whether these be polytheistic or pantheistic. No attempt is made to impose doctrinal correctness. What is important is the “technology” or method a movement uses to bring about the spiritual and material effects it claims to be able to produce. Most disagreements within and between NRMs are over the “technology”

rather than doctrine. It was this that caused considerable dissension within Scientology and between the main body of Scientologists and breakaway groups.

The global character of the NRM phenomenon is truly striking (Clarke 2006a). Many movements are of South Asian origin, among them the previously mentioned Hare Krishna movement, the Brahma Kumaris movement, and the Sai Baba movement, all of which became well known in the West in the 1970s. Examples of Southeast Asian NRMs are the Cao Dai movement of Vietnam and SUBUD of Indonesian provenance. In East Asia, in addition to Japan, China has also seen the rise of numerous NRMs, among them Yiguandao, later known as Tian Dao, a strongly millenarian movement, and in Taiwan several large, influential and dynamic NRMs have arisen, such as the engaged Buddhist movement the Tzu-Chi (Truth and Compassion) Foundation, started by Dharma Master Chen Yeng from the then relatively poor city of Hualien in Eastern Taiwan in the mid 1960s. One of the most controversial NRMs started in South Korea in the 1950s and, as mentioned above, is known as the Unification Church and/or the Moonies.

Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean have produced countless NRMs during the past 60 or so years, some of which, the Santo Daime movement (Brazilian Amazon) and Rastafarian movement (Jamaica), for example, are well known. Many other NRMs began in the United States, among them the Nation of Islam (NOI) one of whose architects was Noble Ali Drew from North Carolina, who founded the Moorish Science Temple in Chicago in the 1920s, and Scientology founded in 1952 by L. Ron Hubbard (1911–86). Europe likewise has produced a large variety of NRMs, among them the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order started by Dennis Lingwood (known as Sangharakshita) in the United Kingdom in 1967, The Work which follows the teachings of George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff (c.1886–1949) who opened the Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man at Fontainebleau near Paris in 1922, and the modern Wicca movement with whose development Gerald Gardner (c.1884–1964), author of *Witchcraft Today*, was closely associated.

NRMs have moved in all directions from South to North, North to South and from East to West and the converse and have contributed to an increase everywhere in the variety of types of beliefs, rituals and spiritualities which people can now choose from. The beliefs and practices of all religions are now more familiar to a far greater number of people everywhere, resulting in new forms of syncretism. For example, it is not uncommon for Christians in Europe, and the West generally, to believe in both the resurrection of Jesus and the teachings of reincarnation and karma, the latter often summed up in the words “one reaps what one sows,” whether it be in this life or some other. Moreover, in Europe while something of the personal element remains as the rituals and prayers addressed to the Supreme Being make clear, God is now considered as some kind of impersonal being or force or power by far more people than was once the case. The idea of the Self as divine and/or auto-theism, found in Scientology and the NAM, both of which will be discussed below, is also gaining ground. Before considering in more detail these and related developments, I will look briefly at the topic of theism and NRMs in a number of cultural and geographical contexts, beginning with Africa and then moving to India and Japan.

Theism and African-Derived NRMs

Theism and African NRMs was mentioned above when referring to Godianism, an NRM of Nigerian origin. As was then stated, this movement rejects the Christian

notion of God in favor of a single God of Africa, a belief which it claims is supported by ancient Egyptian sources. In this case then God is the God of the nation or continent or race. Also critical of Christianity's impact on Africa is the Mungiki movement of Kenya. This movement began to take shape in the 1980s under the name Tent of the Living God. Mainly a youth movement Mungiki, the name it later adopted, has as one of its principal aims to salvage Gikuyu culture from the confusion created by Christian missionaries. In a vision, two of its leaders, schoolboys at the time, claimed that God (Ngai) ordered them to lead their people out of bondage to Western, including Christian, ideologies. There are also echoes here of the idea of God as the creator and protector God of Africa, of the nation, and indigenous culture.

The African Independent Churches (AICs), which began to mushroom across the continent from the 1890s, are in Turner's classification (1991: 189) "orthodox," meaning among other things theistic in the Christian sense of the term. These churches include the Zionist and Ethiopian Churches of Southern Africa, the *aladura* or praying churches of Western Africa and the Kimbanguist Church of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Clarke 2006a: 186–207).

While Turner refers to the AICs as orthodox and, therefore, theistic in the Christian sense of the term, not all researchers are persuaded that Christianity or, for that matter, Islam brought theism to Africa south of the Sahara. It has been persuasively argued by Horton (1971), among others, that there already existed, prior to the advent there of Christianity and Islam, a latent and sometimes even explicit monotheistic tradition. Christianity and Islam acted as catalysts, hastening a process that was already under way, a process in which monotheism was fast becoming the cornerstone of the cosmology of African societies, displacing in importance belief in the lesser or minor deities. Modernization, part of which was the new wave of missionary expansion in the second half of the nineteenth century, was, as much as anything else, driving the change in Africa, a change that saw belief in the Supreme Being emerge from relative unimportance to become the core belief of African cosmology.

NRMs that trace their beliefs and practices back to Africa are numerous and include the Rastafarian movement, which is of Jamaican origin and began in the 1920s. In this movement God is known as Jah and is found deep within the self. Rastafarian ideas on God resemble in certain respects those found in the Self-religions (see below). It is essentially a millenarian movement that places its hopes and aspirations in the return of the Messiah in the person of Emperor Haile Selassie I (1892–1975) of Ethiopia who was seen as the fulfillment of Psalm 68, interpreted to mean that God, Jah, had singled out the Black race for a special role in the history of salvation.

The African American movement now known as the NOI was founded in Detroit, Michigan in 1930. The movement has had different names since it came into existence in the first quarter of the twentieth century and has also reinterpreted its understanding of God which over the years has become, from an Islamic perspective, somewhat more orthodox, especially from 1975 when Wallace D. Muhammad took over the leadership. Now its principal belief is in one God called Allah who manifested himself to the founder Wallace D. Fard (1877–1934) in 1930. Importance was attached formerly to a cyclical notion of God who was not considered immortal. The first God was a man and all gods were Black men. Also part of the teaching was the idea of a "God of gods," and the belief that each god performs a different function, one creating the sun, another the moon, and so on. Gods are like humans in many respects and every 25,000 years one God dies and passes on his knowledge and "godship" to another (Taylor 1998).

Theism and Indian NRMs

Among the early Indian NRMs is the Brahmo Samaj movement, which was founded by the prominent reformer Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833) in Bengal in 1828. Although mainly inspired by the Upanishads and Vedanta philosophy—the main principle of which is the existence of one absolute reality called Brahman—this movement was also influenced by the English Deist movement known as Unitarianism of which there are several branches, most of which hold that the main foundations for the belief in the existence of a Supreme Being are human reason and the observed features of the natural world.

Among the more contemporary Indian NRMs that can be described as “theistic” in some sense are those which belong to the Vaishnava tradition, among them the previously mentioned Hare Krishna movement. The principal belief of Vaishnavism is the recognition of Vishnu (also known as Narayana) as the Supreme Deity. Many avatars (incarnations) of Vishnu, especially Krishna and Rama, also share this status while other gods of the Hindu pantheon such as Ganesha do not, but are instead regarded as “demi-gods” or devas.

Shiva, although subordinate to Vishnu, is regarded as being higher than the devas and as, in some sense, a Supreme Deity. Dada Lekraj, the diamond merchant and founder of the Brahma Kumaris movement, which he started in 1937 in Hyderabad in what was then part of northwest India and is now Pakistan, is reported to have experienced regular indwellings of Shiva whom he spoke of as the “Supreme Soul” in a way a Christian might speak of God.

These Indian NRMs have spread across the world and particularly to the West, to such an extent that some observers have begun to speak, where religion is concerned, of the Easternization of the West (Campbell 1999). In the West, notions of God have become less theistic and more like those found in Indian religions. Moreover, multiple membership is increasingly more common, people preferring to identify themselves as Christian Buddhists, for example, rather than simply Christian or Buddhist. Doctrinal purity is no longer a serious concern in this context as beliefs such as the previously mentioned central Christian belief in the resurrection of Jesus are found to be compatible with Oriental notions of karma and rebirth. There are also Buddhists who see in images of the Buddha the person of Jesus also (Interviews with Tzu-Chi members, Taiwan, Dec. 2010).

There is further comment on this Easternization process in the discussion below of theism and the NAM and Self-religions. A process of Westernization has, in turn, influenced the development of theism in certain Japanese NRMs, as it did in India.

Theism and Japanese NRMs

The Japanese scholar, Anesaki Masaharu (1873–1949), wrote about the rise of Popular Theism in Japan in which women played a prominent role as teachers and leaders and which combined “a strong theistic doctrine with prophetic utterances” (1930: 311). Prior to the rise of this “Popular Theism” there was an intellectual brand of theism in the air in the nineteenth century, which can be seen in the writings of some of the foremost campaigners for the purification of Shinto from Buddhist and Confucian influences. The most prominent and passionate spokesperson of this resurgent Shinto movement was Hirata Atsutane (d. 1843) who was familiar with Jesuit missionary writings

in China and incorporated some of their ideas into his Shinto theological formulations, and hence his notion of a Heavenly Centre Lord (Ame-no-minakanushi) whom he placed above the Sun-goddess (Amaterasu-no-mikami) (Kitagawa 1987: 165).

Among the exponents of "Popular Theism" Anesaki (1930: 309ff.) singles out for special mention Kino (1756–1826), the first woman teacher of this form of theism. Kino was a peasant woman in Owari and her theism, when discovered by a scholar in 1927, was given the name of *Nyorai*, the Japanese equivalent of the Buddhist *Tathāgata* (one who has attained what is really so), or of *Isson* (Unique Reverend). While she used Buddhist terms Kino's teaching seemingly had little or nothing to do with Buddhism, but might have been influenced by the Kirishitan or Hidden Christian Creed which used a compound term derived from Latin and Japanese, *Deus-Nyorai*, for God (Anesaki 1930: 312). The Hidden Christians (Kirishitan) were those Christians who remained loyal to their outlawed Catholic faith that had been brought by the missionary St Francis Xavier in the sixteenth century. God became known among Christians generally in Japan by the word *Deusu* until 1868, and this is still the preferred term of the Hidden Christians. The Hidden Christians themselves were greatly influenced by Buddhism and made use of Buddhist concepts and ritual forms to conceal their Christian faith and practice. It is possible, therefore,—and I am speculating here—that those who came into contact with these Christians did not understand that the worship they saw being practiced was anything other than an unusual form of Buddhism.

In Kino's teachings the world is said to be created by an omnipotent God who was moved solely by love and whose purpose in creating the universe was the salvation of mankind. All Buddhas and deities were subordinate to this God and Kino's divinely appointed task was to be the savior of the human race. While Anesaki accepted that Kino's teachings were influenced by the Kirishitan, he also felt that there was an original element to Popular Theism in Japan as propounded by Kino and by the female founder of Tenrikyō, Nakayama Miki (1798–1887). He wrote of Kino's teaching: "This borrowing of a Buddhist term (*Nyorai*) may suggest a certain amount of Buddhist heritage, yet her teaching had almost nothing to do with Buddhism, but was entirely original, although it may be suspected of some contact with the Kirishitan creed" (Anesaki 1930: 311f.).

Called Oyasama (worthy parent) by her followers, Nakayama Miki reported having been possessed in 1838, a year after she founded Tenrikyō, by a god who called Himself "the Lord of Heaven" and who announced the arrival of the "important moment" (*Shunkokugen*) (Anesaki 1930: 313). In the Prologue of what is perhaps the most important of Tenrikyō's sacred texts, the *Mikagura Uta*, there is a strong theistic emphasis. We find there passages such as: "Sweep away all evils and save us, oh God our parent (Oyagami)! Listen to the word of God. Listen . . . In the manner of Earth and Heaven, I created man and wife, the dawn of human life" (Thomsen 1963: 41). God the Parent is said to have revealed Himself first as Kami, which has a variety of meanings including the Creator of the world and all human beings, or the Original, True God, and was later to reveal Himself as Tsuki-hi or Moon-sun God. Furthermore, in Tenrikyō worship the deity is called the Lord of Divine Wisdom (Tenri-Ō-no Mikoto) "who is conceived of as the sole deity of all, creator of all things, and the gracious sustainer of life" (Thomsen 1963: 49).

Further evidence of theism is to be found in chapter 8 of this NRM's biography of its founder which states:

Human beings were created by God the Parent (Oya-gami) and live due to divine providence. Therefore, God and human kind are truly Parent and children, and all human beings are brothers and sisters. Because of this truth, God the Parent loves us children single-heartedly now, as in the past.

(Tenrikyō Church Headquarters 1996: 121)

Thus, Tenrikyō's God, called variably Kami (God), Tsukihi (Moon-Sun) and Oya (the Parent), is a caring, intimate God constantly interacting with human beings and with Her/His creation.

This God is different from a *kami*, a spirit that protected, controlled and punished humans, and who was only vaguely worshipped. Thomsen believes that Tenrikyō's monotheism owes more than Anesaki suggests to the influence of Hidden Christians and points to a good number of similarities between Tenrikyō and Christianity, including similarities in words such as "sacrament," "ascension" and "mediatrix," in prayers and in accounts of creation—the Tenrikyō creation myth uses the phrase "let us create man" reminiscent of Genesis (Thomsen 1963: 59).

Anesaki (1930), and later Thomsen (1963) and Kamstra (1994), point to the monotheistic qualities found in other Japanese NRMs, among them Kurozumikyō, founded by a Shinto-priest Munetada Kurozumi (1780–1850). This movement regards the Sun-goddess, Amaterasu-o-mikami, as the Supreme Deity or Great August Deity. Kurozumi's faith in the Great August Deity was, Anesaki writes, "so personal and intense that his religion verged on *monotheism pure and simple*" (1930: 315, my italics). The idea of a Supreme Deity is also present in Konkokyō, founded by Kawate Bunjiro (1814–83). This NRM worships Tenche kane no kami, the Great Golden God of the universe. A notion of God similar to that found in Konkokyō is also present in the previously mentioned NRM Ōmoto established in 1892. In Ōmoto, God is known as the invisible Creator of the Universe or Great God of the Universe; and everything on earth is said to be the manifestation of this invisible Being. Some of the statements made by Ōmoto about God seem to point to a panentheistic, and others to a pantheistic, notion of God.

More recent Japanese NRMs, some of them closely linked through their founders with Ōmoto, among them Seichō no Ie (House of Growth) (1930), Sekaikyusei kyo (Church of World Messianity) (1935), Mahikari (True Light) (1959), and several others, all have a similar concept of God to that found in Ōmoto. The last mentioned movement, Mahikari, worships the Su-god who occupies the highest tier of the divinities and whose essence is fire. This God bathes the world in a baptism of fire and is the source of True Light. What are referred to as the five major religions of the world (Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Islam and Christianity) are united under the authority of this God who was spoken of and preached about by Moses and Jesus, both of whom were Japanese Jews (*nikkeijin*) who died in Japan.

In his search for the origins of monotheism in Japanese NRMs, Kamstra (1994) pays more attention than either Anesaki (1930) or Thomsen (1963) to the Christian literature either written or translated in China by Jesuits and which found its way into Japan. Although the general edict of 1630, the so-called edict of *Kan'ei* issued by Shogun Iemitsu, forbade the importing into Japan of Christian books written by Jesuits in China, such literature was, nevertheless, regularly brought into the country by Chinese traders and included books written by the Jesuits Matteo Ricci and others. Among the well-known Japanese scholars who read these and other "secret" works were Honda Toshiaki (1744–1821), Koga Toan (1788–1847), Sato Nobuhiro (1769–1850),

Mitsukuri Gempo (1799–1863) and the previously mentioned Hirata Atsutane (1776–1843) who were, paradoxically, in Kamstra’s words “the last of the great men of restoration Shinto or *fukko shinto*” (Kamstra 1994: 107). Kamstra writes that Hirata Atsutane “turned Ame-no-minaka-nushi [i.e., one of the gods who came into existence when heaven and earth became separated] into a monotheistic god by ascribing to him the creative qualities which are peculiar to the Christian tenshu [i.e., Lord of Heaven]” (Kamstra 1994: 111). I turn now briefly to a context—that of Indonesia—in which being theistic is a *sine qua non* for recognition by the State as a religion.

Constitutional Theism and NRMs: The Case of Indonesia

In Indonesia belief in God is a *sine qua non* for recognition by the State as a genuine religion with the rights and privileges associated with such a status. One of Indonesia’s best-known NRMs, SUBUD (from the Sanskrit terms: *Susila Budhi Dharma*, meaning surrender to the will of God), exhibits much of the diversity of religion and spirituality that exists in Indonesia. Founded in the 1920s by Bapak (father) Muhammad Subuh (Dawn) Hardiwidjojo (b. 1901) from Central Java, the movement began to take shape as an organization in the 1940s. SUBUD, however, has never been recognized as a religion in Indonesia. Though a distinction was made between faiths, mystical groups and religions, and though the range of what constituted “genuine” religion recognized and supported by government was extended in 1965 by the Presidential Decision on religion to include Buddhism, Confucianism and Hinduism, it still remained the case that to be a religion it was necessary to fulfill a number of criteria all of which any NRM would find it difficult, if not impossible, to meet. As Howell points out, “the ‘religions,’ in short, are required to approximate to the form of orthodox Islam and Christianity more closely than the ‘faiths’ and mystical groups are required to do” (Howell 1982: 536). One requirement is a long history and another “revelations based upon humanity in past ages” (Howell 1982: 536).

SUBUD, an essentially Javanese Sufi or mystical movement based on the spiritual practice known as *latihan kijiwaan* (spiritual exercise), sought recognition as a religion, but due to opposition from strict Muslim and Christian groups, this was refused to “new religions” (*agama baru*) by the Constitution which recognizes as religions only six so-called world religions. I turn briefly now to theism, the NAM and the Self-religions.

Theism, the NAM and Self-Religions

Although much has been written about it (see, for example, Heelas 1996 and Kemp 2004) there is no single, widely accepted definition of the New Age Movement (NAM). Others, including this writer (Clarke 2006a) have asked whether it would not be more helpful to consider the NAM as mainstream rather than an alternative form of spirituality. Some observers were suggesting more than a decade ago (see Sutcliffe and Bowman 2000) that the age of the NAM was over, while others have described it as “secular religion.” Bryan Wilson (1999) depicted Scientology in a similar way calling it a “modern form of secular religion,” while this movement provides for Heelas (1991) a classic example of Self-religion.

New Age is an umbrella term to cover a vast range of diverse spiritualities in pursuit of self-realization through spiritual means which will lead to the transformation of human consciousness. Such a transformation, when it occurs, will usher in the Age of Aquarius, a period in history when the Sun will be in the sign of Aquarius at the Spring equinox.

The NAM is composed not of a single “theology” but of countless metaphysical thought systems, some of which display Christian monotheistic thinking (Kemp 2003; 2004) but the majority of which are greatly influenced by monistic notions of the divine. The focus of the NAM is primarily on spiritual evolution and the evolution of the spirit and the purpose of its many and varied practices is to drive this evolution forward, directing human beings to higher and higher levels of awareness of their divine Self until such a point is reached where humankind as a whole will come to understand its divine or godlike nature. It is a widely shared belief among New Agers that human beings are essentially both good and spiritual.

New Age thinking about God has been strongly criticized by leading members and spokespersons of the Catholic Church, as posing a serious threat to the fundamental beliefs of monotheistic religion including, clearly, the belief in a unique, personal, creator God, the doctrine of original sin and the doctrine of salvation through Christ’s death and resurrection. According to the version of the Gaia hypothesis developed by the scientist James Lovelock (2000) and espoused by New Age holists, planet earth is a complete and self-regulating system which, along with its inhabitants, comprises a single, living organism. Ideas such as these and others have led Christian leaders to describe the NAM as a “modern form of Paganism” (Clarke 2006a: 37).

Like the NAM, many of the Self-religions (Heelas 1991) have been heavily influenced by Asian, and more generally Eastern, ideas of spirituality and divinity and do not acknowledge an external theistic being but, rather, use spiritual and psychological techniques to reveal the god within and/or the divine self. The Forum and/or *est*, whose origins are in the United States (Tipton 1982) holds to the belief that the self itself is god. Scientology, also American, is based on *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health* (written in 1952 by its founder L. Ron Hubbard, see Wallis 1976), the content of which is not without some degree of Eastern spiritual influence. This NRM teaches that a human is an immortal, alien, spiritual being, a *theta*, trapped in a physical body on Planet Earth. Humans are intrinsically good, omniscient, and capable of unlimited creativity but need to be set free, so to speak, from all the obstacles and traumas, physical, psychological and spiritual of the everyday world, that prevent them from understanding and realizing their true nature, which is spiritual, and acting accordingly. Through methods such as auditing and training a person can rediscover her/his true identity and then all things become possible.

Conclusions

A variety of forms of theism are to be found in NRMs and point to the religious culture from which these movements come and, at the same time, reflect the changing patterns of belief in contemporary society, such as the move towards an idea of God as an impersonal force or power or mind into which, one day, all will be absorbed. Another widespread form of theism found in NRMs is what might be termed the internalization of god which, as we have seen in the case of the NAM and Self-religions in particular, holds that the divinity is inherently within oneself or that the Self is divine. Such auto-theism represents a form of transformed humanism in which god becomes the means to perfect human beings. While these would appear to be among the most strongly held viewpoints on the nature of god it does not exclude other theistic beliefs of a polytheistic, panentheistic or even monotheistic kind. Where a Supreme Being external to the self is believed to exist this being tends to be understood in a panentheistic rather than a

deistic sense, in other words, it is a belief in a God deeply involved in the material world, and intimately associated with human beings.

Related Topics

Chapter 8: African Religions; Chapter 12: Twenty-first Century Intellectual Life; Chapter 22: Sociology; Chapter 23: Psychology; Chapter 36: Religious Diversity; Chapter 37: Globalization; Chapter 50: Spirituality

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- Clarke, P. B. (ed.), (2006) *Encyclopedia of New Religious Movements*, New York: Routledge. Gives a positive light to contemporary and innovative NRMs.
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SEVENTEENTH- AND EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY INTELLECTUAL LIFE

Geoffrey Gorham

Theism permeated European intellectual life during the Early Modern era, just as it had for centuries before. But by no means was theism taken for granted. The Reformation of the sixteenth century challenged longstanding assumptions about our relation to God and spawned a long period of religious innovation and strife that played out in churches, learned salons, and on the battlefield. It was uncertain whether the new science that emerged in the seventeenth century, with its elevation of individual reason and revival of pagan metaphysics, would invigorate traditional theism, transform it, or sweep it away forever. In 1600 the natural philosopher Bruno was burned in Rome for voicing heterodox opinions about God and the structure of the world. In 1811 the young poet Shelley was temporarily “sent down” from Oxford for openly publishing “The Necessity of Atheism” (Shelley 1993). Yet despite two centuries of nearly continuous and mounting pressure, theism remained a dominant and vigorous intellectual force at the dawn of the Romantic era. By this time, theism was no longer monolithic and mandatory for intellectuals, however, and the other sciences were no longer, as Aquinas (ST, 1a.1.5) put it, the mere “handmaidens” of theology.

The Grounds of Theism

In the scholastic tradition it was generally held that reason and revelation are complementary ways of knowing God. For example, Aquinas maintained that we could know by natural reason that God exists and is immutable, but only by revelation (directly from God or through a human proxy) that God created the world in time and was incarnated in the person of Christ. There was considerable debate about the exact domains of reason and revelation. Bonaventure, for instance, thought creation in time was demonstrable by natural reason. There was also debate about the extent of “overlap” between the domains, for example, whether a person possessed of a rational proof about God could also believe what was proved on faith. Still it was assumed that revelation was a major source of knowledge about God and, indeed, that theology was the most perfect science since its first principles were derived from the divine rather than created (hence

fallible) intellect. And, for similar reasons, knowledge obtained by natural reason was a matter of degree (merely probable vs. demonstrative) but faith was absolutely certain. Nevertheless, on the traditional picture, reason and revelation often work together. For example, according to Aquinas, the existence of God is not itself an article of faith but, instead, a preamble to knowledge of God which is “perfected” by faith (ST 1.2.2). And even the knowledge we can obtain of God by natural reason “is assisted by the revelation of grace. For the intellect’s natural light is strengthened by the infusion of gratuitous light” (ST 1.12.13).

This integrated religious epistemology was repudiated by Reformation theologians who, following Calvin, emphasized the imperfection of human reason and the absolute inscrutability of the Godhead. In our fallen condition we encounter God only by faith, or at most by our will rather than our reason. On this conception, theism is a kind of practical wisdom concerned with proper subservience and salvation, not a theoretical wisdom or “scientia” of the divine nature. But the pendulum began to swing back to the rationalist side with the dramatic rise of natural philosophy in the seventeenth century. Galileo’s detailed mix of empirical and conceptual arguments ensured the triumph of the Copernican system despite the Vatican condemnation of 1632. Although Descartes was sufficiently un-nerved by the Galileo affair to suppress his own early scientific writings, in the later *Meditations* (1641) he freely applied the tools of philosophy to the question of God. The dedication of this famous work opens with the observation “I have always thought that two topics—namely God and the soul—are prime examples of topics where demonstrative proofs ought to be given with the aid of philosophy rather than theology” (AT 7 1). God is employed in the foundations of Descartes’ physics as well, which he finally published in 1644. His fundamental conservation principle and three laws of motion are derived from the immutability of God’s continuous creation.

But according to Descartes we learn nothing about God by assuming the world serves his ends: “There is considerable rashness in thinking myself capable of investigating the purposes of God” (AT 7 39). Spinoza was even more dismissive of teleology: to invoke God’s reasons in science is to take refuge in a “sanctuary of ignorance” (1994: 113). Nevertheless, teleological reasoning became the favorite tool of natural religion. Leibniz maintained that mechanical and teleological explanations are harmonious, one revealing the *order of nature* and the other the *order of grace*. Against Epicurean atheism, Bacon found it incredible “that an army of infinite small portions, or seeds unplaced, should have produced this order and beauty without a divine marshal.” He insists that because nature evinces design, “a little philosophy inclineth man’s mind to atheism; but depth in philosophy bringeth men’s minds about to religion” (1663: 81). Robert Boyle, against the Cartesians, makes the point even more explicit in his *Disquisition on Final Causes*:

[I]t seems injurious to God, as well as unwarrantable in itself, to banish from philosophy the consideration of final causes; from which chiefly, if not only I cannot but think (though some learned men may do otherwise) that God may reap the honour that is due to those glorious attributes, his wisdom and his goodness.

(Boyle 1772: 401)

Teleological reasoning was also employed by the most influential English thinker of the seventeenth century, Isaac Newton. In the General Scholium to the second edition of

the *Principia* (1713) he asserts: “This most elegant system of the sun planets and comets could not have arisen without the design and dominion of an intelligent and powerful being” (1999: 940). Berkeley invented a novel version of the design argument in his dialogue *Alciphron* against “free-thinkers,” likening visual impressions to a fine “language” which represents to us the distances and sizes of tangible things without resembling those features: “the great Mover and Author of nature constantly explaineth himself to the eyes of men” (1949: 157). This argument makes quite literal a common metaphor of the period: nature is a second “book of God.”

The teleological theology was taken up by clerics and Newtonian popularizers such as Bentley, MacLaurin and Addison, as well as by French deists such as Voltaire, who nicely encapsulates the eighteenth-century alliance between Newtonianism and natural theology: “a catechist announces God to children, and Newton demonstrates him to the wise” (1962: 104). But this approach to theism was powerfully challenged by several of Hume’s writings, especially the posthumous *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779). Even today this work is thought to contain some of the most trenchant criticisms of the teleological strain of natural religion. And yet even the skeptical character Philo—who presumably reflects Hume’s own point of view—admits near the conclusion of the *Dialogues*:

That the works of Nature bear a great analogy to the productions of art, is evident; and according to all the rules of good reasoning, we ought to infer, if we argue at all concerning them, that their causes have a proportional analogy.
(1982: 79)

Hume’s arguments against natural religion met with vigorous intellectual opposition from eminent authors, including Joseph Priestley and Richard Kirwan. These responses encouraged Paley (2006) in composing his epitome of the teleological strain of natural religion, *Natural Theology* (1802), which Darwin read as a schoolboy.

Those philosophers who, while eschewing teleology, remained committed to a rational foundation for theism relied on a priori arguments. In the Fifth Meditation Descartes argues “from the fact that I cannot think of God as not existing, it follows that existence is inseparable from God and hence he really exists” (AT 7 67). Spinoza also held that God’s essence involved existence (1994: 91) although Leibniz pointed out that such proofs are sound only if the concept of God does not involve a contradiction. Leibniz claimed to have filled this lacuna, but the argument was subject to a more telling objection, which was already made by Gassendi in his objections to the *Meditations*: “existence is not a perfection either in God or in anything else; it is that without which no perfections can be present” (AT 7 224). The point that existence is not a predicate (perfection) was later enshrined by Kant: “Being is evidently not a real predicate, that is, a conception of something which is added to the conception of some other thing. It is merely the positing of a thing” (A 598/B 626; 1998: 567). Kant’s critique effectively banished the “ontological argument” (as he labeled it) from rational theology, though it was lately revived in the guise of modal logic.

Various forms of the cosmological argument, which asserts that the world depends on the existence of God, were also promulgated in the Early Modern period. Descartes argued that the whole world, and the idea of God in particular, must originate in God himself. Theologically reticent philosophers, such as Locke and Hobbes, also endorsed “first cause” proofs. Although it was routinely pointed out that such arguments hardly

bring us to the “God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,” proponents were happy to fall back on revelation to fill out the picture and make room for faith. A more serious weakness with cosmological arguments is their reliance on the highly vexed notion of efficient causality. Descartes maintained that the reality of an effect is somehow pre-contained in the cause. Combined with the cosmological argument, this seems to entail a kind of pantheism or emanationism. This was a welcome consequence for Spinoza, and the neo-Platonist Henry More, but certainly not for mainstream theists. Empiricists preferred a more minimal conception of the causal connection, which however fails to make creation intelligible to us. Thus, in the first edition of the *Essay*, immediately after setting out his cosmological argument, Locke conceded that the creation of minds and matter are “equally beyond our comprehension” (*Essay*, IV, x, 18; 1979: 628n). In an unpublished manuscript, “De Gravitatione,” Newton tried to develop a more intelligible model of the creation of matter, where God makes various “determinate quantities of extension” impenetrable (Newton 2004: 28–31). These quantities are what we perceive as bodies. According to Locke’s French translator La Coste, Locke learned this theory from Newton and flags it in later editions of the *Essay* when he mentions a “dim and seeming conception how matter might at first be made” (*Essay*, IV, x, 18; 1979: 628). The more common explanation was simply that God’s omnipotence *entailed* his power of *ex nihilo* creation. This way of grounding efficient causality threatens to rob mere created things of causal power, a consequence that was explicitly drawn by seventeenth-century occasionalist philosophers such as Malebranche: “there is only one true cause because there is only one true God; . . . the nature or power of each thing is nothing but the will of God” (1980: 448). Hume ridiculed the occasionalist picture as “fairy-land” (2007: 67). Yet it paves the way for Hume’s own account of causal powers as psychological projections onto mere associations. This is occasionalism minus God.

The traditional argument from common consent (*ex consensu gentium*) was largely abandoned in the seventeenth century. The idea is that the universal belief in God is best explained by the truth of that belief. The constant strife among Christian sects during the century, and the increasing awareness of sincere heathens (China and America) and pagans (Ancient Rome), obviously weakened this argument. Locke’s well-known broadside against the Cartesian doctrine of innate ideas in Book I of the *Essay* also counted against *consensu gentium*. Locke pointed out that no proposition, not even “whatever is, is,” can claim universal consent (*Essay*, I, ii, 4–5; 1979: 49).

For many rationalistic intellectuals of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, revelation continued to play an important role in religion. Boyle, for instance, observes that

the free decrees of God and his determinations concerning the government of the world and the future state of mankind (to name now no others) are things which no human reason can pry into, but must owe the fundamental discovery it makes of them to him whose purposes they are.

(1979: 209)

To accommodate mystery and revelation, rational theologians relied on a distinction between claims “above reason” and claims “contrary to reason,” admitting only the former into theology. Typically, “contrary to reason” meant self-contradictory, as for Leibniz, who insisted on the principle of non-contradiction as stringently in religion as in metaphysics. The above/contrary distinction allowed moderate theological orientations, such as the liberal or “latitudinarian” wing of the Church of England, to rule

out of court the supposed doctrinal excesses of Catholics and Protestant sects while retaining core “articles of faith.” Thus, Chillingworth wrote in the *Religion of Protestants* against a Jesuit opponent: “Following your Church I must hold many things not only above reason but against it . . . whereas following the Scripture I shall believe many mysteries but no impossibilities” (1870: 464).

But this way of reconciling reason and revelation faced opposition on two fronts. From the side of faith, religious skeptics such as the French Calvinist Pierre Bayle dismissed the distinction between reasonable and unreasonable revelation as arbitrary and incoherent. How can we know, for example, that a doctrine is not contradictory if we cannot even comprehend it? Drawing on re-discovered Pyrrhonist texts, Bayle rigorously argues that various doctrines are simply rationally indefensible. For Bayle the lesson to draw is not simply that religious belief is irrational but that a belief is religious precisely because it is beyond reason. The necessity of faith (fideism) was earlier extolled by his Catholic countrymen Montaigne and Pascal. The priority of revelation to reason was perhaps most prevalent within German, especially Lutheran, theology that was encouraged by the Pietist movement. Pietists, such as the theologian Spenser and the philosopher Thomasius, insisted on the superiority of a religious lifestyle and inward devotion over the intellectualism and disputations common to scholasticism and the various new systems of philosophy.

From the other side, strict rationalists saw no point in preferring incomprehensible to patently inconsistent doctrine. English deists such as John Toland aimed to reduce all religion to natural religion by demonstrating that the true core of Christian belief is neither above nor contrary to reason. In *Christianity Not Mysterious*, Toland argued that it is only Church dogma, with its scholastic philosophical trappings, that renders the Christian religion obscure to ordinary people: “The uncorrupted doctrines of Christianity are not above their reach or beyond their comprehension, but only the gibberish of your divinity schools they understand not” (1970 [1696]: 141). This sort of rationalism was already well entrenched in England owing to the influence of the European reformist movements of the “radical reformation,” especially the anti-trinitarian Socinians whose liberal theology and politics, and fallibilist epistemology, inspired the latitudinarian tendency within the Church of England. Locke, Newton and many of the deists were Socinian to varying degrees.

In the wake of Hume’s dismantling of the epistemological and metaphysical framework of natural religion, Kant reconfigured the grounds of religious belief in terms of his transcendental idealism. Theoretical proofs of God and immortality, whether from concepts or from experience, are not merely invalid but impossible insofar as they would take us beyond the limits of possible experience. Nevertheless, reason inevitably posits the idea of God—as the unconditioned condition of everything else—in its striving to unify the phenomena we do experience. The idea of God, therefore, has a “regulative” function in helping to guide and motivate inquiry but can never be known in itself. So despite the arduous metaphysical path to his religious philosophy, Kant was finally not so far from the Pietist tradition in which he was raised, as his own elegant encapsulation of his position in the Preface to the second edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason* suggests: “I had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith” (B xxx; 1998: 117).

It is noteworthy that some of the most radical theological perspectives of the seventeenth century—Hobbes’ materialism, Spinoza’s pantheism and Newton’s Socinianism—were accompanied by deep interest in biblical criticism and the history of religion. Likewise, nearly all the eighteenth-century deists and *philosophes*, as well as the skeptic

Hume, were concerned to explain, if not justify, the historical origin and persistence of religious belief. Increasing literacy and the advance of mass printing technology made the Bible accessible to a much wider circle of the educated public. And with the Reformation's repudiation of the hermeneutical privilege of the priesthood, questions about the origin, authenticity and meaning of the biblical texts took on greater urgency. Scholars on both sides of the reason/revelation divide were concerned to uncover the true message of the texts and identify the historical source of its corruption. But inevitably the increased scrutiny and historicizing of the Old and New Testament books fueled skepticism.

The Content of Theism

What it means to be a theist was hotly contested in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Consider for instance Voltaire's definition in his widely read *Philosophical Dictionary*:

[A] man firmly convinced of the existence of a supreme being, as good as it is powerful, which has created all the extended, vegetative, feeling and thinking beings; which perpetuates their species, which punishes their crimes without cruelty, and rewards virtuous actions with kindness.

(1962: 479)

Voltaire omits the traditional infinite attributes of God (omnipotence, omniscience, and so on) and likens him to a secular judge. That he aims to radically re-conceive theism is revealed by the very next entry, "Theologian": "at his death he confessed he had squandered his life uselessly" (1962: 481).

There are a number of reasons theology might have limited use, at least one of which was taken very seriously by medieval theologians themselves. Even if God exists, our language and concepts might be wholly inadequate to describe him. Humans have finite intellects that are stocked mainly with ideas derived from the senses; but God is infinite and insensible. Yet the Bible describes God in plain language and says we are made in his image. Church murals and icons depict God. Are all such representations hopelessly inadequate? The standard answer was: inadequate, yes; hopelessly, no. Against the opinion that we say God is "good" and "alive" only because he is the cause of goodness and life in other things—as we say a food is "healthy"—Aquinas maintains that such labels do "signify the divine substance, and are predicated substantially of God, although they fall short of a full representation of Him" (ST 1.13.2). Our ideas of finite things represent God literally because God is the source of whatever perfections they possess:

So when we say "God is good" the meaning is not, "God is the cause of goodness", or "God is not evil"; but the meaning is, "Whatever good we attribute to creatures, pre-exists in God", and in a more excellent and higher way.

(ibid.)

But the perfections are so much greater in God than created things, that the corresponding terms are not applied univocally in the two cases, just as "smart" or "good" could apply literally but equivocally both to a man and a dog (ST 1.13.5). This semantics of "analogy" allowed a realist theology while preserving the remoteness of God from

human experience. It also explained how we are in the image of the Creator and why paintings can indirectly represent him. However, in the late Middle Ages, theistic language was increasingly construed as literal and univocal. Nominalists such as Scotus and Ockham argued that “being” must be univocal since for any pair of things this is prior to any relation of similarity or analogy between them. Univocity was further encouraged by the “mathematization of nature” advocated by Galileo, Descartes and Newton. If the world is fundamentally geometrical then so is God’s understanding, since it comprehends the world perfectly. But since mathematical language is paradigmatically univocal, God’s intellect is, to this extent, perspicuous. Some, such as Pascal, resisted the drive to literalist theology and continued to insist on a purely symbolic language for God. Others, especially in the Calvinist tradition, abandoned analogy (and icons) altogether and resolved that God was beyond human description. Among philosophers, Hobbes adopts this stance. Attributes ascribed to God positively (such as power and goodness) signify only our own admiration and obedience to him: “in the attributes which we give to God we are not to consider the signification of philosophical truth but the signification of pious intention to do him the greatest honor we are able” (*Leviathan*, 2, 31, 33; 1994: 241).

Descartes attempts to blunt the univocalist implications of mathematization in two ways. On the standard conception mathematical essences are somehow contained eternally in God’s understanding, as adequate ideas or exemplars. Descartes maintained, to the contrary, that they are produced in time through God’s arbitrary will. In this sense mathematics does not capture God’s essence but only his dictates. Furthermore, although he maintains that God is an actually infinite substance he denies that humans can comprehend actual infinity (AT 7 46). For example, we understand merely that extension or space is unbounded or “indefinite.” Locke adopts a similar line: although God is “incomprehensibly infinite” our idea is not positive but merely negative: “space, duration and number, being capable of increase by repetition leave in the mind the idea of an endless room for more” (*Essay*, II, xvii, 7; 1979: 213). But Newton, who is more accustomed to treating of mathematical infinity than Locke, insists that the notion of infinite applied in physics is positive: “We can imagine a greater extension and then a greater one but we can understand that there is an extension that exists greater than any we can imagine” (Newton 2004: 23–4).

The triumph of univocal semantics had enormous implications for two of God’s traditional attributes: immensity and eternity. On the received view, the ubiquitous presence of God was different from the local presence of created things. Although God is literally in every place, he does not possess the quantity or dimensions of the place he occupies. In Aquinas’ terminology God’s presence is not “circumscriptive.” Rather God is omnipresent in virtue of his creation of all things: “by the very fact that He gives being to the things that fill every place, He Himself fills every place” (ST 1.8.2). Descartes adopts a similarly equivocal analysis of God’s immensity in his 1649 exchange with Henry More. The Englishman had asked: “how is he [God] able to communicate motion to matter, as he did in the past, and as he does presently according to you, if he is not able to as it were touch this matter?” (AT 5 238). Descartes replies along the traditional lines: “In God and angels and in our mind I understand there to be no extension of substance but only extension of power” (AT 5 342). More finds it hard to conceive how something can have extension, including God, without having quantitative dimensions. And so rather than deny God’s immensity he allows God to be extended in a strict, univocal sense. Indeed, late in his career More seems to identify God and absolute space, noting “more

or less twenty" shared traits: "one, simple, immobile, eternal, complete, independent, existing from itself, subsisting by itself, incorruptible, necessary, immense, uncreated, uncircumscribed, incomprehensible, omnipresent, incorporeal, permeating and encompassing everything" (More 1995: 57).

The association between God and space became very common in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Thus when Leibniz asked Samuel Clarke whether Isaac Newton is among those "modern Englishmen" who hold space to be "God himself or one of his attributes" (Leibniz and Clarke 2000: 14), the answer could only be, in so many words, yes. For in the *Queries* to his *Optics* Newton had likened absolute space to God's visual space, that is, to his "sensorium" (2004: 130). And in the highly theological General Scholium to the *Principia* he explicitly repudiates the classical position—"He is omnipresent not only *virtually* but *substantially*"—and posits that "by existing always and everywhere, he constitutes duration and space" (1999: 941). In a footnote he cites a scriptural passage that many Early Modern metaphysicians were fond of: "For in him we live, and move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28). As the remark from the General Scholium indicates God was no less brought into physical time. At least since Augustine, it was generally held that God's duration was somehow "all at once" rather than successive or day-by-day. Boethius' definition of divine eternity was, perhaps, the best known: "possession of life simultaneously entire and perfect, which has no end" (2001: 144). But the coherence of this "standing now" (as Aquinas called it) was challenged by numerous philosophers, including Locke (politely) and Hobbes (less so): "they will teach us that eternity is a standing still of the present time, a *nunc-stans* (as the Schools call it); which neither they nor anyone else understand" (*Leviathan*, 4, 46, 22; 1994: 461).

God was considered the ground of morality as well as of nature. Indeed, Bayle's suggestion (1826, 1: 169) that atheists could, and have, lived virtuously was routinely dismissed as paradoxical. But this raises the perennial question of God's precise relation to the moral law. In the natural law tradition originating from Aquinas, moral principles are derived from the eternal law, which is simply God's governance of the world in accordance with his perfect knowledge of what is best. Aquinas raises the question whether there is any need for a divine law (such as commandments) if the moral principles or natural law follows directly from God's providence. He answers that since human reason is fallible, "that man may know without any doubt what he ought to do and what he ought to avoid, it was necessary for man to be directed in his proper acts by a law given by God, for it is certain that such a law cannot err" (ST 2a.91.4). This indicates that Aquinas considers morality (in the sense of what is best for the world) to be true independently of God's will, as he makes clear in another article: "the Divine law commands certain things because they are good, and forbids others because they are evil, while others are good because they are prescribed, and others evil because they are forbidden" (ST 2b.57.2).

The opposing "voluntarist" conception of morality, as depending entirely on God's will, was defended in the late medieval period by Ockham, who notoriously maintained that we would be obligated to hate God if He commanded this. This view is adopted by other philosophers who give priority to God's will, such as Luther and Calvin, as well as Descartes, who as we have already seen is a voluntarist even about mathematical truth. Hobbes also conceives law as ultimately issuing from God's commands, whose authority depends simply on his overawing power, that is, on the efficacy of his will:

To those therefore whose power is irresistible the dominion of all men adhereth naturally by their excellence of power; and the right of afflicting men at his pleasure, belongeth naturally to God almighty, not as creator and gracious but as omnipotent.

(*Leviathan*, 2, 31, 5; 1994: 236)

The most influential moral voluntarist of the Early Modern era is the German philosopher Pufendorf. On his conception God superadds a moral dimension—values, rights, obligations—to the morally neutral physical creation without guidance from any pre-existing moral principles. Since this moral realm follows simply from God's will and because our reason is incapable of scrutinizing God in any case (although we can be sure of his benevolence), moral philosophy is largely separated from the sort of speculative theology exemplified by scholasticism. In this respect, Pufendorf's voluntarism actually fosters secularist ethical thought. His radical distinction between the physical and moral realms also anticipates the is/ought gap enshrined by Hume.

The opposing "intellectualist" strain of natural law is developed most thoroughly in the seventeenth century by the Dutch scholar Grotius. Initially a voluntarist, Grotius later renounced that view in the strongest of terms. The validity of natural law is derived entirely from human nature and is accessible to natural reason. Human nature is created by God, of course, but our duties do not rest merely on God's commands. The natural law "would still have great weight even if we were to grant, what we cannot grant without wickedness, that there is no God" (Grotius 1853: xli). Leibniz is another influential rationalist, who attacks both Pufendorf for his moral voluntarism and Descartes for his wholesale voluntarism: "In saying that things are not good by virtue of any rule of goodness but solely by virtue of the will of God it seems to me that we unknowingly destroy all of God's love and all of his glory. For why praise him for what he has done when he would have been equally praiseworthy in doing the exact contrary?" (Leibniz 1989: 36). And John Locke's political philosophy offers a rationalist answer to Hobbes' voluntarism. Reason teaches us the laws of nature commanded by God but the force of these laws does not reduce to God's will. In fact at least some of them bind God himself: "Grants, promises, and oaths, are bonds that hold the Almighty" (*Two Treatises*, 2, 195; 1990: 396).

The rationalist conception of God's relation to morality flourished in the eighteenth century, especially in England. In Cudworth's *Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*, the main target is the opinion of "divers modern theologians" that "whatsoever God can be supposed to do or will, will be for that reason good or just, because he wills it" (1996: 14–5). On the contrary, he defends the typically Platonic view that "if there be anything at all that is good or evil, just or unjust, there must of necessity be something naturally and immutably good and just" (ibid.: 16). This does not make morality independent of God since these truths exist, albeit immutably, in his wisdom rather than his will. It does, however, imply that we are not motivated simply by the commands of an external authority. And, indeed, Cudworth held that morality compels us through its own nature, which we understand by reflection and conscience, rather than simply by command. Using language later echoed by Kant he asserts the law of love within us frees us "from all law without us, because it maketh us a Law unto our selves" (Cudworth 1970: 124). This conception of morality as inwardly apprehended yet divinely grounded was further taken up in the "moral sense" model of Shaftesbury and the intuitionism of Butler and Clarke. Yet these intellectualist approaches were themselves subject to chal-

lenge, though on naturalist and conventionalist, rather than theological, grounds. The deist Mandeville proffered an egoist, or rational self-interest, account of the foundations of morality while Hutcheson, Hume and Smith privileged sentiment. Although Reid and the common sense school attempted to sustain a traditional association between religion and ethics, by the end of the eighteenth century the Euthyphro problem of how God provided a ground for morality had not so much been solved as sidestepped. Kant altogether dispenses with the “natural law” approach but still relates God to morality. In the *Critique of Practical Reason* he maintains that the postulate of God serves as a transcendental guarantor of the ultimate convergence of virtue and happiness, without which our pursuit of the highest good through practical reason would be futile and incoherent. Practical reason must “postulate the existence of God as belonging necessarily to the possibility of the highest good” (Kant 1997: 104). Kant insists, however, that this postulate is not in this way proven theoretically but is, rather, assumed as an object of “moral faith.” Or, as he puts it in “Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason,” although morality in itself has no need of religion yet “morality leads inevitably to religion” (2001: 59). In Kant’s scheme, religion depends on morality, not vice-versa.

Non-Theisms

The most serious challenger to theism in the Early Modern era was deism. Considered as method, deism is natural or rational religion stripped of all revealed, mystical, inspired, parochial, and mysterious elements. Since established churches and authoritative or charismatic religious figures are the most common sources for these elements within theism, deists are typically anti-clerical and anti-scholastic. Since natural philosophy is the best means of identifying and overcoming superstition, deism tends to be pro-science. Considered as doctrine, deism is a loosely related mix of views: God is a supremely good and wise person; God created the world but does not intervene in its operation; God rewards virtue and punishes vice; the soul is mortal; the Bible is allegorical, poetical and humanly inspired; there is a core rational truth shared by all religions; religious diversity should be tolerated; Christ is neither divine nor divinely inspired. Deism combines the anti-clerical and individualistic attitude stemming from the Reformation with the empiricism, progressivism and universalism of Newtonian science. It develops the more radical themes of various movements within Christianity: Arianism, Socinianism, Unitarianism and liberal Anglicanism (latitudinarianism). The earliest English deists were seventeenth-century aristocratic intellectuals such as Lord Cherbury and Charles Blount. The movement flourished in the first half of the eighteenth century under Matthew Tindal, John Toland, Anthony Collins, and Thomas Woolston. Locke was a philosophical inspiration but latitudinarian himself rather than deist. Literary sympathizers included Milton, Pope and, later, Tennyson. Deism had a part in the founding of the American republic through colonial figures such as Jefferson and Paine. In France deism was espoused by Voltaire and Rousseau. For its blanket rejection of revelation, miracles and the divinity of Christ, the deists were strongly attacked by a variety of Protestant writers such as Berkeley, William Law and Joseph Butler in England, and Jonathan Edwards in America. In France, some of the strongest (yet mostly genial) criticism of deism came from the atheists such as Baron d’Holbach. Atheistic rejection of deism also emerged in England, though somewhat later, for example from Shelley.

Hume’s relation to deism is somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand he certainly accepted, and in turn encouraged, the deists’ criticisms of miracles, superstition and

dogmatism. And he also contributed to the deist project of historicizing and contextualizing religious practice. But Hume's rigorous skepticism undermines the rationalist pretensions of the deist no less than the scholastic. Though the concluding passages of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* seem to award the verdict to the deist Cleanthes over the skeptic Philo and the fideist Demea, the work as a whole—especially when combined with the criticism of miraculous testimony and the cosmological argument contained in other works—is a strong indictment of Cleanthes' rationalism. For Hume religious belief, however restrained and ecumenical, remained a “continued miracle” (2007: 116). Kant accepts many of the characteristic doctrines of deism: the untenability of traditional dogma; the independence of morality from revealed religion; the priority of reason over revelation in theological inquiry; the universality of true religion. However, as noted above, Kant rejects the deist unification of science and religion since his God is beyond the limits of possible experience.

While deism was for many theists a “live option” in William James' sense, and was openly embraced by eminent intellectuals and political leaders, the same could not be said for two other alternatives: pantheism and atheism. Spinoza's doctrine of “*Deus sive Natura*” was derived from mostly Cartesian metaphysical principles and was considered especially threatening to traditional theism because Spinoza, like Descartes, removed all purpose, intellect and will from nature. And so it appeared to many theists and deists that his pantheism was merely thinly veiled atheism. Even the best-known religious skeptics of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Bayle and Hume, respectively, were disdainful of Spinoza's doctrine. Bayle called it “the monstrous hypothesis” (1826, 3: 287) while Hume found it simply “hideous” (2000: 158). What frightened Bayle most, and would have offended Descartes, was that attributing extension to God amounts to “ascribing to him an infinite number of parts” (1826, 3: 291). But despite the near-universal dissent from Spinoza, there were strong pantheistic tendencies in numerous philosophical theologies, especially those put in service of natural philosophy. I have already mentioned the Cartesian doctrine that the world is somehow “contained” in its continuous efficient cause, that is, God. As I explain below, Hobbes makes God part of the material world. Berkeley makes the whole sensible world God's ideas (or copies of them). And even the revered Newton seems to make space and time divine attributes, as explained above. When combined with his less-pronounced doctrine that bodies are simply parts of space that God makes impenetrable, Newton's physico-theology is perhaps closer to Spinozism than he (or his legions of disciples) would be willing to admit.

The reputation of atheism preceded atheism itself. From the mid-seventeenth century, charges of atheism were common—Hobbes and Spinoza were (with good reason) the usual suspects—and countless tomes were dedicated to atheism's refutation, for example, Walter Charleton's *The Darkness of Atheism Dispelled by the Light of Nature* (1652) and Henry More's *An Antidote against Atheism* (1653). Already in 1623 Marin Mersenne estimated that there were 50,000 atheists residing in Paris, which would amount to roughly 1 in 6 citizens (Ariew et al. 1998: 137 n2). But open avowals of disbelief were nearly unheard of until the latter half of the eighteenth century (and then mainly in France). Even Hume, if Diderot's recounting is to be believed, confessed to Baron d'Holbach at a Paris dinner that he'd never met an atheist (only to be informed that the dinner table was surrounded by them). The open atheists at d'Holbach's dinner table might have included, besides the Baron and Diderot, la Mettrie and Helvetius. The French atheists were generally scientific in their orientation, which for them meant

also materialist and determinist. D'Holbach's *System of Nature* opens with the simple declaration: "The source of man's unhappiness is his ignorance of nature" (1835: 8).

As Bayle's "paradox" of the virtuous atheist indicates, theism was so strongly linked with morality that unbelievers could not be trusted. This is why Locke, in his famous *Letter Concerning Toleration*, specifically exempts atheists: "promises, covenants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no hold upon an atheist" (1989: 31). Voltaire maintains against Bayle that in a civilized society it is better to have even a bad religion than none at all. This is why "[i]f God did not exist we would have to invent him." The deist Tindal also accepted the social utility of false religion. In his defense of atheism, d'Holbach maintains that even an intemperate atheist is less dangerous to society than a superstitious bigot. Like all the eighteenth-century *philosophes*, the French atheists could be viciously polemical and militant (easily outdoing the "new atheists" of today). But d'Holbach was at pains to distinguish his sober, tough-minded naturalism from the libertine sensualism with which atheism was commonly associated. Yet there were definite elements of hedonism and immoralism among the Parisian atheists, the most famous example being d'Holbach's disciple the Marquis de Sade.

Not only the *propriety* but even the *possibility* of sincere and thoughtful atheism was widely doubted. In his brief essay "Of Atheism," mentioned above, Bacon notes that according to Scripture the fool *says* rather than *thinks* in his heart that there is no God: "Atheism is rather in the lip than in the heart" (1663: 47). Similarly, Hume's likely mouthpiece in the *Dialogues*, Philo, asserts that an atheist "is only nominally so and can never possibly be in earnest" (1982: 80). Even those who accepted the existence of thinking or "speculative" atheists tended to assume that most putative unbelievers are motivated by passion rather than reason. These "enthusiastical atheists" as Cudworth labels them, "are not led, or carried on, into this way of atheizing by any clear dictates of their reason and understanding but only by a certain blind and irrational impetus" (1820: 291). And it should be noted that atheism was attacked as vigorously by deists as by theists. Cherbury, for example, says if there are any atheists (which he doubts) they must be motivated by an emotional revulsion to the excesses of theology. And Voltaire, while vindicating Vanini of the charge of atheism, does not excuse unbelief itself: "Atheists are for the most part bold and misguided scholars who reason badly" (1962: 103).

Both Bacon and Cudworth trace the roots of thinking atheism to ancient materialism, especially Epicurus. The Cambridge Platonists, especially Henry More, suspected that Descartes' mechanical philosophy would lead to materialism and, consequently, atheism if his system were not supplemented by an intrinsic "Spirit of Nature." In the eighteenth century Berkeley maintained that his immaterialism was the natural ally of religions since upon the foundation of materialism "have been raised all the impious schemes of Atheism and Irreligion" (1998: 136). However, numerous proponents of the mechanical philosophy, such as Gassendi and Charleton, explicitly aligned themselves with the Epicurean program while disavowing any association with wholesale materialism or atheism. Even Locke, certainly no atheist, was prepared to allow the logical possibility of "thinking matter" and might have accepted the Socinian heresy that the soul is naturally mortal. But the most impressive attempt to meld materialism and theism was Hobbes' Corporeal God. Late in life he seemed to abandon his relatively orthodox position that God is absolutely incomprehensible and confessed instead that God could only be "a most pure, simple invisible spirit corporeal" (1839-46: 313). Like Descartes, Newton and several other seventeenth-century philosophers, Hobbes employs God in the founda-

tions of his natural philosophy. The eighteenth century might have finally realized the unification of science and rational theology, but for the failure of reason itself.

Abbreviations

- AT: Descartes, R. (1976) *Oeuvres de Descartes*, 11 volumes, edited by C. Adam and P. Tannery, Paris. Citation by volume and page number. Descartes (1984–85 and 1991) provide the standard English translations.
- ST: Aquinas, T. (1964–1981) *Summa Theologiae*, 61 volumes, Blackfriars (eds), New York. Citation by part, question and article.

Related Topics

Chapter 1: Western Philosophy; Chapter 13: Evidence; Chapter 16: Natural Sciences; Chapter 49: History and Experience

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Recommended Reading

- Antognazza, M. R. (2006) "Revealed Religion: The Continental European Debate," in K. Haakonssen (ed.), *Cambridge History of Eighteenth Century Philosophy*, volume 2, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. A detailed overview of the reason/revelation dichotomy in eighteenth-century European philosophy and theology.
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- Israel, J. I. (2001) *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. A detailed account of the "radical" side of Enlightenment social and religious thought as exemplified by Spinoza and the Deists.
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NINETEENTH- AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY INTELLECTUAL LIFE

Jacqueline Mariña

After the Copernican shift in philosophy inaugurated by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), reflection on the nature of subjectivity decisively shaped how the question of God was approached and understood, especially on the European continent. Because this topic is a vast one, I limit myself to discussing three interrelated issues at the forefront of nineteenth- and twentieth-century thought on subjectivity and the problem of God. These issues will be explored as they were worked out by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), Paul Tillich (1886–1965) and Karl Rahner (1904–84). The chapter is divided into three parts. Part one deals with the ontological nature of subjectivity itself and what it reveals about the conditions of the possibility of a subject's relation to the Absolute. Part two explores the role of subjectivity and interiority in the individual's relation to God, and part three takes a look at the theme of the “unhappy consciousness,” and how its development led to important attacks on theism. At the end of the chapter I offer a few reflections on how the sophisticated theist might reply to some of those attacks.

Adequacy and Subjectivity

The Copernican shift set in motion by the work of Immanuel Kant not only revolutionized philosophy, it was transformative of theology as well. The pioneering work of Friedrich Schleiermacher, who as a young man had immersed himself in the work of Kant, set forth a theological vision that both critically embraced, and moved significantly beyond, Enlightenment insights. Starting from an analysis of subjectivity greatly indebted to Kant and those who followed him, Schleiermacher analyzed the conditions of the possibility of the self's relation to the Absolute. In doing so, he made groundbreaking claims that would influence theological discourse throughout both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: any theological discourse *adequate* to its subject matter must take into account the role of the subject in its relation to the Absolute; failure to do so leads to a concept of God wholly inadequate to the reality of God, one in which God is understood as outside of, and completely other than, the subject.

An analysis of the subject and the objects to which it is directed reveal that God cannot be an *object* for a subject. For any object grasped by a subject is conditioned by that subject in myriad ways. Insofar as the object that is *for* a subject is grasped as *different* from the subject, the object must be limited by the subject. Since the object is different from the subject, there must be a unified horizon or space, as it were, in which both subject and object appear, can be grasped *as* different from one another, and *in* which they can interact. As such, the Absolute, or that which is wholly unconditioned, cannot *appear* to a subject; were it to appear it would not only be conditioned by the space *in* which it appears, it would also be limited by the subject *to* which it appears. Furthermore, any object that appears must, as appearance, be conditioned by the *a priori* structures of the knowing subject; as such, objects of knowledge conditioned by these structures are not unconditioned. Schleiermacher notes that

any possibility of God being in any way given is entirely excluded, because anything that is outwardly given must be given as an object exposed to our counter influence, however slight that may be. The transference of the idea of God to any perceptible object . . . is always a corruption.

(Schleiermacher 1999 [1830]: §4.4)

Given these limiting conditions, is it possible to speak of God at all? While we cannot, according to Schleiermacher, speak directly of the Absolute, we can speak of ourselves *as conditioned* by the Absolute, for the Absolute grounds both self and world. For the Schleiermacher of *Christian Faith*, all genuine religion is grounded in the “feeling of absolute dependence” or what he also calls the “God-consciousness.” This “feeling” is not one feeling among others that can be made an object of consciousness, but is given at the very ground of consciousness itself, in what Schleiermacher calls the immediate self-consciousness. In self-consciousness, the self makes itself its own object, and can thereby distinguish between itself and the world. However, the relation between self and world, between the spontaneity and receptivity of the self, presupposes an original unity of consciousness, a moment given in pure immediacy, wherein the two are one. It is this original unity of consciousness that makes possible the transition between the moments of spontaneity and receptivity. The consciousness of absolute dependence is given in this moment of pure immediacy; it is “the self-consciousness accompanying the whole of our spontaneity, and because this is never zero, accompanying the whole of our existence, and negating absolute freedom” (ibid.: §4.3). God is the “[w]hence of our active and receptive existence” (ibid.: §4.4). However, while the Absolute must accompany all moments of consciousness (since it grounds the self), consciousness of God is not directly given in the immediate self-consciousness (Adams 2005; Frank 2005). What is given, rather, is a consciousness of the self as absolutely dependent, in particular in regard to its own spontaneous action in relation to the world. The consciousness of absolute dependence is the consciousness that “the whole of our spontaneous activity comes from a source outside us” (Schleiermacher 1999 [1830]: §4.3). Consciousness of the self as dependent arises from the consciousness of a “missing unity” in the river of the soul’s life as it flickers from spontaneity to receptivity. We can think of this “missing unity” as the horizon or backdrop of consciousness. This horizon comprehends both self and world, and is the condition of the possibility of both their difference from, and relation to, one another. It is traversed by consciousness itself insofar as consciousness must move between itself as the subject of reflection and the world that is given to it to know.

Consciousness comes to an *explicit* awareness of this missing unity only in reflecting upon the transcendental conditions of the possibility of the moments of self-consciousness, in which there is an antithesis between self and world. Both the immediate self-consciousness and the feeling of absolute dependence are only given along *with* the sensuous self-consciousness; that is, only insofar as the self distinguishes between itself and its world can it arrive at an awareness of the underlying unity conditioning the possibility of its making this distinction. There is an important sense, of course, in which this underlying unity is given in the immediate self-consciousness. However, while the *traversal* of this missing unity occurs at the level of the immediate self-consciousness, one only becomes aware of its implications (namely, absolute dependence on the Whence of our active and receptive existence) through reflection.

In the *Dialektik* Schleiermacher asks: “How does it [the immediate self-consciousness] relate to the transcendental ground?” And he answers:

We consider the latter to be the ground of the thinking being in regards to the identity of willing and thinking. The transcendental ground precedes and succeeds all actual thinking, but does not come to an appearance at any time. This transcendental ground of thought accompanies the actual thinking in an atemporal manner, but never itself becomes thought.

(Schleiermacher 2002: 568)

The Absolute transcends consciousness so thoroughly that it “does not come to an appearance at any time.” For Schleiermacher, consciousness of God is not given directly in the immediate self-consciousness. As noted above, what is directly given is a consciousness of the self *as* absolutely dependent. Co-positing along with this consciousness is the Absolute itself.

Similar insights can be found in the work of two of the twentieth century’s most influential theologians, Paul Tillich and Karl Rahner. Tillich, influenced by both Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard, combines Schleiermacher’s insights concerning the relation of the subject to the Absolute with an emphasis on existentialist themes (Tillich 1961: 42). He stresses that God is not a being among beings and cannot be an object *for* a subject:

If God is brought into the subject-object structures of Being, he ceases to be the ground of Being, and becomes one being among others (first of all, a being *beside* the subject who looks at him as an object). He ceases to be the God who is really God.

(ibid.:172)

Because God cannot be an object *for* a subject, God does not, strictly speaking, exist: “God does not exist. He is being itself beyond essence and existence” (ibid.: 205). God is, instead, the ground of being. As such, Tillich agrees with Schleiermacher that God cannot *appear*: “The ground of being cannot be found within the totality of beings, nor can the ground of essence and existence participate in the tensions and disruptions characteristic of the transition from essence to existence” (ibid.: 205). It is thus fundamentally wrongheaded to search for evidence for God’s existence; to do so is to think of God as a being alongside of other beings, one who influences them and as such leaves evidence for its existence among the “traces” of its effects on other things.

The evidentialist challenge to God's existence, which compares the claim for the existence of God to the claim for the existence of a teapot so infinitely small that in principle it cannot be detected by any instrument (Russell 1997 [1952]: 542–8), succeeds only because it defines God in contradictory terms, and then rightly concludes that such a being cannot exist. The evidentialist assumes that if God exists, then God must exist as a thing among things that cannot make an empirical difference. Hence, it is something for which there can be no evidence. If God is defined in such contradictory terms, it is no wonder then that belief in God is irrational! For Tillich (as for both Schleiermacher and Rahner) God as Absolute does not exist *in* the world of things and as such cannot have the sorts of effects, or leave the kind of empirical traces, that things in the world leave. Rather, God, as *absolute* conditions and grounds both subject and object, that is, God is the ground of all that exists. To these reflections Tillich adds the question of ultimate concern: if God is thought of as “one being among others, then [God] would not concern us infinitely” (Tillich 1961: 20). Only that which grounds and conditions all being, including our very existence itself, can concern us ultimately. God, then, is the correlate of an “unconditioned concern” (ibid.: 12).

Many of the same themes are sounded in the transcendental Thomism of Karl Rahner. The original experience of God, for Rahner, is not “an encounter with an individual object alongside of other objects” (Rahner 1984: 54), and the knowledge of God is not one in which “one grasps an object which happens to present itself directly or indirectly from the outside” (ibid.: 21). Rather, the original experience of God is present in transcendental experience, and occurs at the heart of subjectivity itself. This transcendental experience is “the subjective, unthematic, necessary and unfailing consciousness of the knowing subject that is co-present in every spiritual act of knowledge, and the subject's unlimited openness to the unlimited expanse of all possible reality” (ibid.: 20). As the term of transcendental experience, God is co-known in every act of knowledge, not as an object of knowledge, but as that which conditions all knowledge. Transcendental experience is the “subjective, non-objective luminosity of the subject,” and it is “always oriented to the holy mystery.” As such, Rahner argues, the knowledge of God is “always present unthematically and without name” (ibid.: 21).

What Rahner means by *transcendental experience* is further developed through his analysis of “the infinite horizon” which is the “term of transcendence” conditioning both the subject's experience of itself and its “unlimited possibilities of encountering this or that particular thing” (ibid.: 61). He calls this transcendental condition of all experience the “pre-apprehension of being” (*Vorgriff auf esse*) (ibid.: 33). What is pre-apprehended grounds both self and world. This ground cannot be nothing, for “nothingness grounds nothing” (ibid.: 33). Moreover, it is not the mere sum of all beings, but the very condition of their possibility: “Indeed we must express it as something distinct from everything else because, as the absolute ground of every particular existent, it cannot be the subsequent sum of these many individual existents” (ibid.: 61). This ground Rahner calls “the holy mystery.” Because it conditions *all* acts of knowledge, God, as holy mystery, is always experienced unthematically, even by those who deny God's existence.

The difference between God and world, according to Rahner, is fundamentally different from the difference between categorical realities. For *that* categorical realities can be compared with each other presupposes an ultimate horizon or backdrop against which they appear and can be set in relation to one another. Hence Rahner notes that the difference between categorical realities “is antecedent to them because they presuppose as it were a space which contains and differentiates them, and no one of these

categorically distinct realities itself establishes its difference from the other or is this difference" (ibid.: 63). God, on the other hand, is different from the world in that God grounds the very possibility of the difference between categorical realities and between self and world. As such, God can only be experienced in original, transcendental experience, in which the unique difference between God and world "is experienced in such a way that the whole of reality is borne by this term and this source and is intelligible only within it" (ibid.: 63). As such, God can only be experienced in the very depths of the self, wherein the ground of both self and world can be found. God is not "outside" the self in the way that categorical realities are. To think in such a way is to count God among existent *things*. Those who think of God in this way are imagining a false God, one that does not exist (ibid.: 63).

As can be gleaned from the discussion thus far, theism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was revolutionized by Kant's Copernican revolution laying out the transcendental conditions of objective knowledge. For Kant, of course, objective knowledge had to do only with possible objects of *this-worldly* experience. But Kant's focus on the subject's contribution to knowledge was extremely fertile, leading Schleiermacher and those who followed him to investigate the subject's relation to the Absolute. Theological investigations carried along these lines came to surprisingly similar results. God cannot appear, and is not among the appearances. Hence categories of thought applicable to empirical objects cannot be employed in cognizing God. Rather, God must be thought of as the ground of both the subject and its world. And as such, God can only be experienced in the depths of subjectivity itself, in that moment establishing the difference between self and world, and conditioning both.

Thus far I have provided an account of how an analysis of subjectivity furnished important clues into how God, as absolute, had to be conceived from an ontological perspective. However, the riches of this theological tradition did not reside in this ontological analysis alone but, rather, in how these results were applied to an understanding of the subject's relation to God from what we now would call an existential perspective.

Ultimacy and Interiority: Why Subjectivity Matters

I now turn to the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard. There is no doubt he was significantly influenced by Schleiermacher's thought (Crouter 2005: 98–119). He moved beyond Schleiermacher, however, in exploring the nature of subjectivity and its relation to absolute dependence from the first-person standpoint, that is, the standpoint of the subject engaged, in one way or another, in his or her life project. Kierkegaard eschewed the kind of abstract philosophical thought exemplified by Hegel's logical system. Instead, he explored questions of ultimate value and their relation to the will from the standpoint of *passionate* engagement. In the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, his pseudonym Johannes Climacus notes "the issue is not about the indifferent individual's systematic eagerness to arrange the truths of Christian paragraphs but, rather, about the concern of the infinitely interested individual with regard to his own relation to such a doctrine" (Kierkegaard 1992 [1846]: 15). What does the standpoint of the infinitely interested individual reveal about subjectivity? What insights can be gleaned from this analysis concerning the conditions of the possibility of the subject's relation to God? These are two of the fundamental questions that preoccupied Kierkegaard in his oeuvre as a whole, and in particular in the *Unscientific Postscript*, one of his most philosophically rigorous works.

Kierkegaard makes several interrelated points regarding these two questions. With regard to the character of subjectivity itself, two points stand out as particularly pressing. First, the analysis that Kierkegaard provides of subjectivity is from the *first-person* standpoint. From this standpoint, the subject is always concerned, even if only implicitly, with the significance and value of her own life. Even when she is bored and needs to amuse herself, or desires to always preserve her freedom so that she never commits to anything and lives the life of an aesthete, she is still involved in a project wherein the character of her existence is at stake. Her identity and her experiences are hers, and she must make sense of them as such. Hence she is always *already interested in them*, and the question is not whether, but *how* she will make sense of them, and consequently how she will decide to act. This first-person standpoint contrasts sharply with the third-person standpoint, in which the individual is viewed as part and parcel of the objective order, firmly ensconced within the causal nexus and thus determined to behave in certain ways by circumstances standing outside of the self.

Second, the character of existence from the first-person standpoint is always a temporal one. My existence is never given to me all at once, like that of the God of Boethius, whose existence is thus said to be eternal (Boethius 1957 [524]). Rather, we proceed from the present to the future. The whole of our life is given one fleeting bit at a time. Tomorrow has not yet occurred, and yesterday has already been lost. And so it is with each instant of time, which continually passes away. The temporality of our existence also implies that the objects of our experience and, indeed, the whole of our existence are given to us piecemeal. Kierkegaard notes that if

being is understood as empirical being, then truth itself is transformed into a *desideratum* [something desired] and everything is placed in the process of becoming, because the empirical object is not finished, and the existing knowing spirit is itself in the process of becoming. This truth is an approximating whose beginning cannot be established absolutely, because there is no conclusion that has retroactive power.

(1992 [1846]: 189)

The fact of our temporality implies that we cannot have a metaphysically complete concept of an object, *à la* Leibniz. In order for us to be able to have such a cognition, the complete object would have to be thought all at once, in a single instant. Kierkegaard follows Kant in shifting from a theocentric model of cognition (which judges the adequacy of a cognition to the extent that it approaches, even if only asymptotically, the divine knowledge of an object occurring *sub species aeterni*) to an anthropocentric one (Allison 2004: 27–45). Human cognition is fundamentally different from God's, for the objects of human cognition—and this includes the self's grasp of itself in self-reflection—are all given in time, one bit after the next.

From the fact of temporality Kierkegaard concludes that a particular kind of objective knowledge is impossible. The *kind* of objective knowledge that temporality makes impossible is objective knowledge understood on a theocentric model, in particular, absolute knowledge of the Absolute in its relation to the finite. This was precisely the kind of knowledge that Hegel claimed to have arrived at in his system. For Hegel, philosophy arrives at absolute knowledge when it grasps the knowledge that God has of God-self. In response Kierkegaard asks:

Of what help is it to explain how the eternal truth is to be understood eternally when the one to use the explanation is prevented from understanding it in this way because he is existing, and is merely a fantast if he fancies himself to be *sub specie aeterni*?

(1992 [1846]: 192)

Hegel's knowledge of the Absolute is a delusion, because the subject is never in a position to grasp metaphysical truths *sub specie aeterni*. Rather, the finitely existing subject is always in motion—*becoming*, and it is only from the standpoint of this becoming that she can attempt to make sense of her relation to the Absolute.

The becoming of the subject is always *directed* to its future: it is a *striving* impelled by passion. Kierkegaard notes that when the individual “is closest to being at two places at the same time he is in passion” (ibid.: 199), that is, the individual is always *becoming* what she is not yet. What the individual knows and does in the moment is only significant insofar as this is related to a project whose completion still lies in the future:

Even if a person has achieved the highest, the repetition by which he must indeed fill out his existence, if he is not to go backward (or become a fantastical being), will again be a continued striving, because here in turn the conclusiveness is moved ahead and postponed. This is just like the Platonic concept of love; it is a want, and not only does that person feel a want who craves something he does not have, but also that person desires the continued possession of what he has.

(ibid.: 121)

Directedness to future tasks, to the completion of meaningful projects, is what impels both the will and understanding forward. Given that human life is experienced only a bit at a time, even the individual who has arrived at the pinnacle of what life has to offer will desire to keep this throughout the future times that she has not yet experienced; she is always, therefore, as Plato averred, in a state of *want*. Existence, understood from the first-person point of view, is always a striving. As such, knowledge relevant to the existing individual must stand in relation to this striving, that is, it must stand in relation to the projects the individual has undertaken, or finally, such knowledge must relate to the question of the ultimate meaning of the individual's finite and temporally conditioned existence as a whole. All genuine knowledge, especially religious truth, must make sense from this passionately engaged, temporally conditioned, first-person *finite* human perspective. Objective knowledge—knowledge from a theocentric perspective—is not only fantastic (for here we ignore the temporally conditioned character of human cognition and delude ourselves into thinking that “the agreement between thinking and being is always finished” (ibid.: 190), but were it to be possible, would be meaningless to temporally conditioned beings such as ourselves who are continuously in movement, and who must make sense of the relation of one moment of our existence to the next.

Given these characteristics of subjectivity, how is understanding of God to be possible? How is the truth to be grasped? Absolute knowledge of the Absolute is impossible for temporally conditioned, finite beings such as ourselves. All our cognition is finite cognition. Our knowledge of the empirical object, for instance, is never complete, for it is always revealed to us only successively, in time. Moreover, this incompleteness is also true of our own earthly existence, unfinished until we pass away. Kierkegaard speaks of

the “continued learning” which is “the expression of the perpetual actualization, which at no moment is finished as long as the subject is existing” (ibid.: 122). The finite subject can never jump out of itself, so to speak, and grasp the complete series of its acts of cognition, thereby grasping itself and its world from a God’s eye perspective. Moreover, reflection (and this includes self-reflection) “has the notable quality of being infinite” (ibid.: 112). The self can always reflect on its acts of cognition, and then reflect on these reflections *ad infinitum*. (In this way it can turn in on itself, and never get out of itself.) Truth then, especially religious truth that seeks to understand the whole of one’s existence in the world, can never be arrived at through an examination of the *objects* of human knowledge, which are never given at once but, rather, constructed through successive acts of synthesis.

This does not, however, mean that the individual cannot stand in a *relation* to truth, for while absolute truth cannot be *captured* in any moment of thought, it can at least be *indicated* by the direction of thought as a whole. The directedness of thought has to do with not only the successive syntheses of discrete acts of cognition with one another, but also with the self’s reflection on its own activity of synthesis, namely self-reflection. Self-reflection thereby implies reflection on the self *as* it cognizes its world. Now, while the completeness of such reflections can never be given, the *drive* to continuously synthesize the successive moments of reflection with prior ones is immediately given through the activity of the self and, as such, proleptically anticipates the whole series. In other words, through reflection on the self’s continuous striving as it moves from one instant of cognition to the next, it is possible to indicate the self and its relation to its world *as a whole*. This is especially true of *infinite passion*: through infinite passion I reflect on my striving as a whole, and am therefore concerned with the ultimate meaning of my life. This is why Kierkegaard claims that God can only be found through the “subjective way”; the existing individual has God “not by virtue of any objective deliberation, but by virtue of the infinite passion of inwardness” (1992 [1846]: 200). Only through the infinite passion can the question of God matter at all, and as such, it is only through this passion that the individual can stand in a real relation to God.

Kierkegaard thus concludes that the *mode* of relating to God (whether through infinite passion or in a merely desultory way) is what determines whether the individual worships the true God or not:

If one who lives in the midst of Christendom goes up to the house of God, the house of the true God, with the true conception of God in his knowledge, and prays, but prays in a false spirit, and one who lives in an idolatrous community prays with the entire passion of the infinite, although his eyes rest upon the image of an idol, where is there most truth? The one prays to God in truth though he worships an idol; the other prays falsely to the true God, and hence worships in fact an idol.

(ibid.: 201)

The individual who prays in a false spirit directs herself half-heartedly; as such, she does not direct herself to what concerns her ultimately, and thereby prays to a false God. On the other hand, *infinite passion* ensures that the relation is directed to that which concerns the self and its world *absolutely*. Since there is only one thing, namely God, that can satisfy the deepest longings of the soul, the *mode* of relating ensures that it is the single Ultimate to which the self is directed.

While the *Postscript*, written by the pseudonym Johannes Climacus contains much that is true, this discussion is qualified and deepened by Anti-Climacus, in particular in *Sickness unto Death*. Kierkegaard took the name Climacus from a Greek monk (c.570–649), the abbot of St Catherine’s of Alexandria at Sinai. Climacus wrote a pamphlet called *Klimax tou Paradeisou*, later translated into Latin under the title *Scala Paradiso*, or the *Ladder of Paradise*. The pamphlet describes thirty steps leading to an imperturbability preparing the soul for a heavenly vision. Climacus, then, represents the subjective pole of the God relation—how the ascent to heaven is possible from the point of view of the subject. The problem here is that Climacus does not move beyond a focus on the infinite passion of the subject; nor does he explore the possibility that the subject might fail to direct itself to that which concerns it ultimately. Anti-Climacus, intimately acquainted with the possibilities of the descent of the soul instead of its ascent, details the despair that ensues when the soul fails to choose itself as it stands in relation to the power that constituted it. Anti-Climacus also moves beyond the subject, underlining the role of the Power that constitutes the self:

This formula [i.e., that the self is constituted by another] is the expression for the total dependence of the relation (the self, namely), the expression for the fact that the self cannot of itself attain and remain in equilibrium and rest by itself, but only by relating to that Power which constituted the whole relation.
(Kierkegaard 1941 [1849]: 10)

The passage is striking in its echoes of Schleiermacher, who defined piety as “the consciousness of being absolutely dependent, or which is the same thing, of being in relation to God” (Schleiermacher 1999 [1830]: §4). Only “by relating itself to its own self and by willing to be itself, the self is grounded transparently in the Power which posited it” (Kierkegaard 1941 [1849]: 11). In other words, only in choosing itself *as* absolutely dependent can the self choose itself. In rejecting itself, or rejecting itself *as* grounded in the Power beyond itself, it rejects the eternal within itself, and as such, despairs. And yet, as Kierkegaard notes: “But the eternal he cannot get rid of, no, not to all eternity; he cannot cast it from him once and for all, nothing is more impossible; every instant he does not possess he must have cast it or be casting it from him—but it comes back” (ibid.: 14). The self, then, is structured in such a way that while despair—which is the desire to be rid of the self as it really is in its absolute dependence—is a distinct possibility, the self is only at peace when it acknowledges itself as grounded in the Power beyond itself. If an individual desires a finite good, but she has not undergone the infinite resignation such that this finite good has been given up to God, so to speak, she stands in danger of despair. In choosing the finite good in such a way (whether it be power or romantic love), she chooses something other than the eternal in herself, and so desires in desperation to get rid of herself. This desire to be rid of the eternal in the self, which is given in and through its absolute dependence, is the descent or fall of the self. It is given as a permanent possibility through self-consciousness, through which the self can freely choose how to relate to itself. The desire to be rid of the self is idolatry, for it is an attempt to ground the significance of the self’s existence in finite and conditioned goods. As such, it is a vain attempt to cover over the soul’s infinite passion, which can only be satisfied through an acknowledgment of its dependence on God.

The impact of Kierkegaard’s existential analysis was enormous. Tillich’s notion of “ultimate concern about the ground and meaning of our being” (Tillich 1961: 42)

makes sense only from such a first-person perspective. Rahner's theology is also deeply embedded in the existentialist thinking Kierkegaard had launched: the transcendental experience of God's self-communication is given in the interiority of the person, and makes sense only in the context of the existential question that the human being is to him or herself (Rahner 1984: 53).

Subjectivity and Atheism

Can the subject's relation to the Absolute go awry? Is the very positing of the Absolute a kind of sickness? These questions were at the forefront of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Continental thought. While the two questions are different, they are inter-related in important ways. It was Hegel who first identified the theme of the "unhappy consciousness," an idea explored by figures such as Kierkegaard and Feuerbach, and then transformed and enriched in significant ways by Nietzsche, for whom it formed the basis of his devastating critique of theism. In this section I briefly discuss its introduction by Hegel and development by Kierkegaard, and then look at the role the idea plays in Nietzsche's atheism.

Hegel identified a key moment in the development of self-consciousness where the self is alienated from itself; this he calls the *unhappy consciousness*. In an earlier version of the story, the misery of human life leads the individual to project all happiness into a future estate, thereby dulling the pain of the present condition, but also devaluing its significance as well. In his later, more sophisticated account, the very appearance of self-consciousness brings with it the unhappy consciousness, for self-consciousness implies consciousness of the antithesis between self and world. The self then comes to understand itself as finite subjectivity, and as such as standing in opposition to the Absolute and Universal. Here the finite subject finds her finite existence bereft of value. All value is, instead, projected onto an Absolute that is other than and beyond both self and world. This subject is not at home in this world; she is constantly longing for God. These sentiments, notes Hegel, "we find expressed most purely and beautifully in the Psalms of David, and in the Prophets; the chief burden of whose utterances is the thirst of the soul after God, its profound sorrow for its transgressions, and the desire for righteousness and holiness" (Hegel 1944 [1837]: 321). Moreover, insofar as the individual is self-conscious of his or her self-assertion in the struggle to exist, she grasps herself at odds with the universal, and thereby comes to understand herself as evil. Hence Hegel notes that "this existence for self, this consciousness, is at the same time separation from the Universal and Divine Spirit. If I hold to my abstract Freedom, in contraposition to the Good, I adopt the standpoint of evil" (*ibid.*: 321–2).

Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (1985 [1843]) is a vivid portrayal of the unhappy consciousness made sick by its longing for the Absolute. Both the knights of infinite resignation and of faith give up that which they most love in the world for God. This resignation is symbolic of a resignation of the value of finite existence in general, in particular of the finite self and its temporally conditioned desires. But once the knight of infinite resignation resigns the finite she is never at home in the world again; the revaluation of the finite becomes a problem. Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes de Silentio, himself a knight of infinite resignation, cannot understand how the knight of faith is able to be at home in the world, to desire earthly things and to take delight in them, once the movement of infinite resignation has been achieved. Kierkegaard uses the beautiful image of the dancer to make his point:

It is said that the dancer's hardest task is to leap straight into a definite position, so that not for a second does he have to catch at the position but stands there in it in the leap itself . . . The knights of infinity are dancers too and they have elevation. They make the upward movement and fall down again . . . But when they come down they cannot assume the position straightaway, they waver an instant and the wavering shows they are nevertheless strangers in the world.

(Kierkegaard 1985 [1843]: 70)

On the other hand, says Silentio, the knight of faith accepts the finite back again in such a way that she cannot be distinguished from a Philistine: "to express the sublime in the pedestrian absolutely—that is something only the knight of faith can do" (ibid.: 70). For Kierkegaard, the movement of the knight of faith is not only a real possibility, but it is *only* through faith in God that genuine love of another is possible. For only the self that accepts its true selfhood, thereby acknowledging the Power that grounds it, is capable of truly loving another in and through this Power.

Friedrich Nietzsche's bad consciousness is also a close relative of Hegel's unhappy consciousness; however, his recommendations are diametrically opposed to those of Kierkegaard. According to Nietzsche, the very nature of self-assertion, of life itself, "operates essentially, that is in its basic functions, through injury, assault, exploitation, destruction, and simply cannot be thought of at all without this character" (Nietzsche 2000 [1887]: 512). However, the requirement that humans live harmoniously amongst themselves in society required the bridling of these instincts. They were not, however, obliterated, but redirected inward: "Hostility, cruelty, joy in persecuting, in attacking, in change in destruction—all this turned against the possessors of such instincts: *that* is the origin of the bad conscience" (ibid.: 521). While this bad conscience is a sickness, it is "an illness as pregnancy is an illness" (ibid.: 524). Out of it is born the entire inner life of human beings; the bad conscience is the "womb of all ideal and imaginative phenomena" (ibid.: 523); it is, as such, the cradle of the soul. Hence Nietzsche notes that "the entire inner world, originally as thin as if it were stretched between two membranes, expanded and extended itself, acquired depth, breadth, and height, in the same measure as outward discharge was *inhibited*" (ibid.: 520). Through the bad conscience the individual becomes conscious of himself *as* a subject; it is, as such, a necessary moment in the development of self-consciousness.

The priests, however, turned this necessary illness into something much worse and more difficult to overcome: they turned the bad conscience into the consciousness of sin and guilt. Hence the religious individual "apprehends in 'God' the ultimate antithesis of his own ineluctable animal instincts," and in doing so "ejects from himself all his denial of himself . . . in the form of an affirmation" (Nietzsche 2000 [1887]: 528); that is, he projects his denial of himself onto something absolute and outside himself—God—thereby gaining an *absolute* foothold for the rejection of all his finite drives! Nihilism—the nihilation of all finite drives—thus arrives at its acme through the *affirmation* of God.

In rejecting theism Nietzsche does much more than reject the idea of God: he questions the value of the idea of truth itself, the affirmation of which he believes requires an impossible *view from nowhere*: the ideal of objective knowledge demands "that we should think of an eye that is completely unthinkable, an eye turned in no particular direction, in which the active and interpreting forces, through which alone seeing becomes seeing *something*, are supposed to be lacking" (ibid.: 555). Insofar as the enterprise of science

requires the positing of objective truth, science too, requires the abnegation of life and an asceticism based on “our longest lie” (ibid.: 588). The person who has faith in science “affirms another world than that of life, nature and history” and must “deny its antithesis, this world, *our* world,” for “it is still a *metaphysical faith* that underlies our faith in science” (ibid.: 588). Hence the positing of the Absolute, according to Nietzsche, whether it be in the guise of an absolute, objective truth, or the absolute ground of existence (God) cannot but lead to an alienation of the individual from himself. The individual is finite, and has only his or her perspective and desires at their disposal. To try to move beyond this finitude with respect to knowledge is a “castration of the intellect” (ibid.: 555), a new kind of nihilism achieving in the realm of knowledge what religion had achieved in the realm of desire.

Nietzsche’s critiques of theism, and others making similar points (for instance, Feuerbach and Marx), had a large impact on Western thought. Two critiques discussed above especially stand out: first, theism provides a totalizing discourse undergirded by an absolute standpoint—that of God. Of course, this “view from nowhere” is a mere fiction, since *all* standpoints are finite. Nevertheless, this God’s eye view is invoked by those in power to legitimize and absolutize their own finite claims, and to invalidate those of the powerless. Second, theism promotes guilt and suffering—a sick “unhappy consciousness” that denies validity to earthly human desires and standpoints insofar as they are recognized as the desires and standpoints of merely finite individuals. Theism thereby leads to a this-worldly nihilism and the projection of all meaning and value, and indeed the very possibility of happiness, into another world.

These criticisms were especially devastating to a particular kind of theistic discourse, one that tended to understand God in simplistic terms, as an *object* for a subject. Other kinds of theistic discourse, in particular of the kind promoted by some of the figures explored in this essay such as Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard and Tillich, were much more resilient to these kinds of attacks. Beginning their approach to theism from an investigation of the nature of the existent subject, their systems had built into them the insight that *all* human knowledge and willing express *only* finite and partial points of view. This is as it should be. As Tillich warned it is the *mis-taking* of what is merely finite *as if* it were absolute that is both idolatrous and demonic (Tillich 1961: 216). Moreover, locating access to the divine at the heart of subjectivity itself, these thinkers had strong arguments showing that true religion overcomes the sickness of the unhappy consciousness. God does not stand *over against* the subject in such a way that God is wholly other and apart from the subject, so that the self must project all value *outside* of itself. Rather, for these figures, God dwells in the depths of the human heart, transforming—not obliterating—human desire into an expression of divine love.

Related Topics

Chapter 1: Western Philosophy; Chapter 3: The God of the Jews and the Jewish God; Chapter 21: Historical Inquiry; Chapter 24: Religious Studies and Theology; Chapter 25: Moral Inquiry

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TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY INTELLECTUAL LIFE

Chad Meister

In the early part of the twenty-first century, philosophical theism is flourishing on a global scale. By “philosophical theism” I mean to signify belief in God apart from the teachings or revelation of any particular religion, where God is a being who is personal (in the sense that God is a subject who possesses both mind and will), ultimate reality (the source and ground of all other things), separate from the world yet actively involved in the world, and worthy of worship (entailing being wholly good, having inherent moral perfection, and excelling in power). This conception of God is common in Western thought and religion, but is also familiar in Eastern traditions.

While philosophical theism is currently thriving, it had a checkered past in the twentieth century. In fact, estimates suggest that half of the world’s population was at least nominally atheist in the mid-twentieth century, and atheism was especially prominent in academic environments (McGrath 2006). During that time, lively debate transpired about the future of God in academia and society. In 1966, for example, *Time* magazine asked, “Is God Dead?” The article focused on problems facing theologians; namely, how to make God relevant to a society becoming increasingly secular. Modern science seemed to be able to explain the fundamental questions of life, many modern psychologists were positing that belief in God was neurotic, and a number of leading theologians were rejecting belief in a personal God—some even rejecting belief in a God altogether. A short time after the publication of the *Time* article, in their study of Western religion, William S. Bainbridge and Rodney Stark made the following observation:

The most illustrious figures in sociology, anthropology, and psychology have unanimously expressed confidence that their children, or surely their grandchildren, would live to see the dawn of a new era in which, to paraphrase Freud, the infantile illusions of religion would be outgrown.

(Stark and Bainbridge 1985: 1)

Indeed, the twentieth century was marked by the belief of many intellectuals that theism, in both its philosophical and religious dimensions, would soon go the way of the ancient Greek and Roman gods.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, one could have supposed a very different scenario for the next hundred years. It would have been reasonable to surmise that the

central context in which theistic discourse is found would be philosophical idealism (the theory that reality fundamentally consists of rational minds or consciousness and their ideas and that the physical world is dependent on mind). With the ascendancy of the German, British, and American idealists (including Georg W. F. Hegel, Friedrich Schelling, F. H. Bradley, J. M. E. McTaggart, and Josiah Royce), idealism began to dominate the English-speaking intellectual landscape. Materialism at that point was suspect. In fact, until the twentieth century, there were not many influential materialists in the history of Western thought. Instead, its counterpart, idealism, was the primary mode of conceiving reality, and most of the great classical philosophers (Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, Kant, Hegel, and so on) affirmed some version of it. It was the prevailing force in European philosophy until the early twentieth century, was embraced by many theists, and entered deeply into several religious traditions, perhaps most notably Christianity. As it turned out, however, by the mid-twentieth century idealism underwent a kind of elanguescence—waning almost to the point of extinction as a viable intellectual position. Its demise came from a kind of empiricism that attracted not only leading philosophers of the day (around 1900), such as G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell, but also many in the scientific community. In its place, pragmatism and positivism became the focal points of intellectual discourse, and so developed into theism's dominant conversation partners.

Pragmatism, spearheaded by the American philosophers Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, was an attempt to bridge two seemingly contradictory streams of thought: the rationalism and idealism of philosophy on the one hand and empirical science on the other. Pragmatism, a mediating philosophy that sought to dissolve these apparently disparate domains, was empiricist in its adherence to facts yet allowed a place for belief in God and other non-empirical ideas. This new philosophy, born out of the practical mindset cultivated in colonial America, was guided by the principle that the primary test of a theory is its functional usefulness. It emphasized the practical consequences of a hypothesis or proposition, and for many it served to unify the domains of fact and value.

The pragmatists maintained that we should accept what is given to us in experience. For some of them, such as James, this meant that we should accept a religious dimension to life, for there are reasonable empirical reports which support such a dimension. But due to pragmatism's criticisms of positivist interpretations of the methodology of science, its subordination of logical analysis to pragmatic factors, and other reasons, by the mid-twentieth century pragmatism's influence was in decline. Another philosophical stream had taken hold, one not so amenable to philosophical theism.

By the 1930s logical positivism was a prevailing philosophical position, a leading school in the philosophy of science, and a prominent view held by many scientists. Positivists used a principle of verifiability to reject as meaningless all non-empirical claims; only the tautologies of mathematics and logic, along with statements containing empirical observations or inferences, were considered meaningful. Since many theistic claims are neither tautological nor empirically verifiable, the positivists took the concept of theism to be cognitively meaningless. Positivist influences were significant and widespread and, by the 1960s, many of the leading Anglo-Saxon philosophers were either atheists or agnostics. These influences infiltrated the theistic religious traditions of the time, and the "death of God" movement became especially popular among American Christian theologians.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, however, the philosophical tide began to turn. Many philosophers arrived at the conclusion that the positivists' radical

empiricist claims and verificationist criteria of meaning were unsatisfactory, problematic, and even self-stultifying. Due in part to the philosophical insights on the nature and meaning of language provided by the later Ludwig Wittgenstein, and the rise of a pragmatic version of naturalism offered by W. V. O. Quine, logical positivism began to wane. With the exemplary work of such analytic theistic philosophers as Basil Mitchell, H. H. Farmer, Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne, and John Hick, by the 1970s discussions of philosophical theism, along with other religious, metaphysical, and ethical issues, were reinvigorated and soon became accepted arenas of philosophical discourse. By the late 1970s the positivists' verificationism completely collapsed and philosophical views that had been suppressed, including those having to do with theism, were once again fair game for intellectual discussion. This collapse, perhaps the most significant philosophical event of the twentieth century, was pivotal to the way the next century would begin to unfold.

The Re-emergence of Philosophical Theism

There are a number of reasons for the rise of philosophical theism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. First, as noted above, epistemologies that rule out God as a meaningful concept were challenged and ultimately rejected as viable means for acquiring knowledge. With their rejection, and the emergence of new epistemologies, which made room for theistic considerations, theistic belief was no longer constrained. This, in turn, provided the platform for the rise of first-rate theistic philosophers who offered both responses to arguments against theism and new sophisticated arguments advancing it. Two such influential philosophers, among others, are Alvin Plantinga and Richard Swinburne. Plantinga is known for his work in analytic philosophy, primarily in philosophy of religion, metaphysics, and epistemology. His utilization of the tools of analytic philosophy to defend belief in God—most notably his development of the notion that belief in God is properly basic—stands as one of the most discussed philosophical developments of recent times. And his free will defense achieved a rare event in the history of philosophy: decisively rebutting the logical argument from evil (Plantinga 1974). Swinburne is known for his work in natural theology, philosophy of religion, and philosophy of science. He is also a leading Christian apologist who uses inductive logic to demonstrate that theism broadly, and Christianity in particular, are rational, coherent, and true. His works in philosophy of religion especially have elicited much discussion about the existence and nature of God.

A renewed interest in natural theology—the area of theology that seeks to demonstrate the existence of God, or to justify a theistic worldview, apart from divine revelation—has accompanied the renaissance of philosophical theism. While the early and mid-twentieth century reflected a decline in natural theology, the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have manifested solid work on the traditional arguments for the existence of God as well as several new ones. Although few today would consider any of the arguments of natural theology compelling proofs for God's existence, many find them useful as evidence for God (Swinburne 1991; Ward 2008; but note also Oppy 2006).

While the increase in theistic philosophers has already had a profound influence on intellectual thought in the early part of the twenty-first century, the escalation of outspoken theists in the scientific community has also affected the current intellectual milieu. A number of leading scientists and scholars in the scientific community are

unabashed in their theistic beliefs. Francis Collins, director of the Human Genome Project, boldly affirms his theism:

As the director of the Human Genome Project, I have led a consortium of scientists to read out the 3.1 billion letters of the human genome, our own DNA instruction book. As a believer, I see DNA, the information molecule of all living things, as God's language, and the elegance and complexity of our own bodies and the rest of nature as a reflection of God's plan.

(Collins 2007)

While there is still a general climate of naturalistic thought in the scientific community, it is now intellectually respectable to be a believer in God in this community (although certain views about how God might play a role in the natural world are still taboo, and for good reason).

Another significant factor in the rise of philosophical theism over the last half-century has to do with challenges to psychological and sociological theories which hold belief in God to be pathological or neurotic. The central examples of such theories are, of course, those promulgated by Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, and Ludwig Feuerbach. In recent decades these theories have themselves come under fire by medical and psychological research, being understood by many to be theories designed primarily to destroy belief in God. In fact, much of the latest research indicates that mental and physical health is positively affected by religious belief (Ward 2006).

There are still the naysayers, though—those persons, for example, who claim that belief in God is a delusion. Richard Dawkins makes the following assertion: “Creative intelligences, being evolved, necessarily arrive late in the universe, and therefore cannot be responsible for designing it. God, in the sense defined, is a delusion; and . . . a pernicious delusion” (Dawkins 2006: 31). But this claim is surely unwarranted. As philosopher Keith Ward argues:

All that is needed to refute the claim that religious belief is a delusion is one clear example of someone who exhibits a high degree of rational ability, who functions well in ordinary affairs of life, whose faith seems to enable them to live well and be happy, and who can produce a reasonable and coherent defence of their beliefs. There are thousands of religious believers who are like that, including some of the most able philosophers and scientists in the world today—Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne, Basil Mitchell, Chris Isham, John Barrow, John Polkinghorne. And this is an almost random selection from a very long list indeed. You can hardly ask for a stronger refutation of the argument that religion is a delusion than this.

(Ward 2006: 172)

There are also those who argue that belief in God is, if not a mental illness, minimally a by-product of eons of evolutionary adaptation in which the brain produced religious illusions that were helpful for survival in the distant past, but are no longer necessary or useful for human advancement and flourishing (Alper 2008). There might well be solid evolutionary explanations of theistic belief. Indeed, recent psychological and neuroscientific research suggests that human minds are strongly predisposed toward, if not hard-wired for, religious belief and behavior (Schloss and Murray 2009). But one certainly

need not conclude from this research that belief in God is therefore false, neurotic, or delusionary. To the contrary, this evidence might well confer support on Pascal's claim that there is a God-shaped vacuum in the human heart, or John Calvin's claim that latent within the human mind is an awareness of the divine.

Yet another reason for the rise of theism in recent decades has to do with the global decline of atheistic political regimes that have been intolerant of theistic and other religious views. There is now a widespread rejection of such atheistic regimes—regimes that, in the twentieth century, facilitated overwhelming human atrocities (by conservative estimates, over 100 million people were murdered by the regimes of Pol Pot, Mao Zedong, Joseph Stalin, and Vladimir Lenin). In their place, political movements that are open to theism are growing rapidly across the globe. This has created a theistic awakening in places previously closed to such views. Explosive growth of Christianity has occurred in China, for example, with conservative estimates indicating that there are currently over 70 million Christians in government-sanctioned and underground churches. David Aikman, former Beijing Bureau chief for *Time* magazine, predicts that as many as one third of the Chinese people will convert to Christianity within the next generation. As China is quickly becoming a dominant global power, this religious transformation will undoubtedly affect other nations in Asia and elsewhere. Christianity is also growing at a rapid pace in India, South and Central America, and Africa. And Islam is also growing precipitously in many parts of the world (Jenkins 2007).

Here in the early part of the twenty-first century, philosophical theism once again enjoys a prominent position in intellectual discourse at the highest levels of academia. Many of the leading philosophers are theists, some of the most prominent philosophical societies are devoted to theistic topics, and a number of the premier academic institutions offer courses and colloquia in philosophical theism. As one well-known atheist philosopher described the current milieu, "God is not 'dead' in academia; he returned to life in the late 1960s and is now alive and well in his last academic stronghold, philosophy departments" (Smith 2001: 4).

Confronted with both numerical decline and a growing rejection of atheism, at the end of the twentieth century many atheists redefined the term to mean something akin to a suspension of judgment on the question of God's existence in contrast to its historic meaning of a reasoned and principled commitment to the non-existence of God. In recent years, however, a small but vocal and growing number of intellectual atheists have been uncomfortable with such a "weak kneed" version of atheism—one which is closer to agnosticism than an open rejection of belief in God—and have spawned a movement dubbed the "New Atheism." These atheists, whose leading voices include Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett (the "Four Horsemen" of the movement), propound prolix and invective responses to theism. The New Atheists are not inconspicuous in their agenda. They do not merely attempt to convince people to quit believing in God; they endeavor to make respect for belief in God socially unacceptable. Richard Dawkins, for example, boldly proclaims: "I am attacking God, all gods, anything and everything supernatural, wherever and whenever they have been or will be invented" (Dawkins 2006: 36). The vehemence of their position can be best explained, perhaps, as a frustrated reaction to the theistic revival.

Rather than becoming a trendy new intellectual movement among the "brights" (a term coined by Daniel Dennett to refer to intellectual atheists), however, many people—including a number of leading atheists—are complaining about the movement's philosophical shallowness, fundamentalist dogmatism, and bigoted intolerance

(Michael Ruse is one such atheist). It seems that the New Atheists have misjudged the current cultural mood, thinking that vitriol and antagonism will foster support. While it has rallied the troops of those already supportive of atheistic fundamentalism, more importantly it has demonstrated to fair-minded thinkers that the New Atheism is abundant in rhetoric but often lacking in substance and reasoned argument. As the feebleness of many of their arguments are exposed, and as the evidence for the positive role of religion in society continues to mount, the intolerance, vagaries, and ill-formed claims of the New Atheists will undoubtedly become more evident.

Despite orchestrated opposition intended to demonstrate its incoherence and falsity, theism has proved to be exceedingly resilient. In fact, early twenty-first-century intellectual life is reflecting a renewed interest and rise in philosophical theism.

New Directions and Currents

So far in the twenty-first century, theism is receiving a great deal of attention in the English-speaking world. While I lay no claim to having prophetic insights or exceptional abilities of predicting the future, given recent development and current trajectories, I do anticipate that over the next several decades theism will be exceedingly relevant to a number of central domains of intellectual enquiry.

First, it seems reasonable to think that philosophical theism will be influential in the hermeneutics of scientific discovery and scientific practice. There are a number of reasons why religious discourse, and theistic discourse in particular, will most likely play a central role in scientific discovery, discussion, and practice in the future. For one, as already noted, there are a number of leading scientists who are themselves theists, and many of them are outspoken in their theistic beliefs and in their views about the integration of science and belief in God. Beyond this, while science has demonstrated amazing progress over the last several centuries, it has not brought with it a sense of happiness (*eudaimonia*), fulfillment, joy, and real human flourishing when divorced from theistic/religious belief. One cannot deny the fruits of the scientific enterprise. It has produced marvelous advances in global communication, disease control, and human/animal/plant provision. But it has also brought with it distressing developments, including international conflict, genocide on a mass scale, and massive destruction of flora and fauna in many parts of the world. Science itself is not to blame for these malevolencies; rather, the underlying concepts that are utilized in the outworking of scientific advances are at the root of the problem (Golshani 2000).

The concepts needed to guide scientific and technological progress in a beneficent direction—one which reflects human, animal, and planetary welfare—are not available within the sciences themselves; they must be brought to the scientific enterprise. In the godless milieu of much recent scientific development and practice, a great deal has been detrimental to living beings and the environment, and it seems fairly clear that worldview assumptions do affect the manner in which scientific advances have been utilized in the past and will be utilized in the future (Stark 2003). A worldview in which human persons, for example, are understood to be intrinsically valuable—ends in themselves and not means to other ends—would probably fare much better for human flourishing than one in which human persons are taken to be the accidental by-products of an atheistic universe. As the early scientific community recognized, theism has much to contribute, for it provides intrinsic meaning and purpose to all creation (Myers 2000, 1993).

Another reason why philosophical theism will be relevant to the future hermeneutics of scientific discovery is that, as the twenty-first century unfolds, the latest research in several key areas of scientific discovery—notably physics, cosmology, and evolutionary biology—is unveiling what many take to be indications of fine-tuning and teleological convergence, both of which are at least compatible with theism and perhaps even, in certain respects, indicators of a theistic universe. In terms of the former, recent discoveries have unearthed what appears to be a remarkable fine-tuning of the cosmos for life. The point is that carbon-based life requires certain precise physical parameters and constants among the basic forces of nature (electrical, gravitational, and nuclear). The laws of nature do not determine the values of these constants, yet they exist in an extraordinarily narrow range—a range that is life-permitting. If these constants (such as the strong nuclear force and the gravitational constant) were different by even very small values, the life-permitting balance within the universe would be destroyed and no conscious life would be feasible. For example, in order for life to be possible, at least conscious life, the strength of gravity must fall in a relatively narrow region. If it were increased by a small amount relative to the range of possible strengths, the force of gravity would crush all conscious life forms (Collins 2006; Leslie 1996; see also Miller 1999).

In the life sciences, in particular evolutionary biology and paleobiology, some of the most recent research points toward a certain necessity in the way evolution has developed. Cambridge University paleobiologist Simon Conway Morris, for example, suggests that the emergence of life leads inexorably to intelligence—that eyes, brains, and even cultures are all evolutionary inevitabilities (Conway Morris 2003). Physicist Paul Davies concurs with this evolutionary directedness: “The laws of physics . . . encourage it to organize and complexify itself to the point where conscious beings emerge who can look back on the great cosmic drama and reflect on what it all means.” He continues:

Moreover, if I am right that the universe is fundamentally creative in a pervasive and continuing manner, and that the laws of nature encourage matter and energy to self-organize and self-complexify to the point that life and consciousness emerge naturally, then there will be a universal trend or directionality towards the emergence of great complexity and diversity.

(Davies 1995: 33)

If all of this is true, then evolutionary developments didn’t occur by mere randomness and chance, but instead reflect directedness and perhaps even rationality—a teleological process guiding unthinking matter toward higher levels of complexity, consciousness, value, and goodness. All of this is consistent with, if not supportive of, a theistic worldview. There need be no war between science and religion. In fact, they can make wonderful conversation partners (Polkinghorne 2000).

Second, philosophical theism will likely play a central role in the development of an emerging and much needed global ethic in the twenty-first century. Even for the cursory observer, it should be apparent that the health and vitality of our planet and those on it are in jeopardy. Famine, warfare, political and religious strife, and environmental disaster: these are common descriptions of the world in which we find ourselves. To some extent they have always been with us, but with recent technological advances, especially over the last several decades, we are, in myriad ways, on the brink of widespread catastrophe. What this means is that there can be no ongoing human society without a world ethic.

This is the claim, at least, of theologian Hans Küng. For Küng and others currently engaged in the development of such an ethic, our world has a chance of surviving only if there is universal agreement on ethical matters for the nations.

Two decades ago Küng and others launched a movement for such a global ethic (Küng 1991; Swidler 2010). Their goal was to create a global consensus on fundamental matters of good and evil and to formulate basic principles of action for the advancement of world peace and human flourishing. By consensus, they drafted a universal declaration through much dialogue and consultation that drew on many of the world's religions. Entitled "Declaration towards a Global Ethic," it was endorsed by the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1993. It identifies four irrevocable directives as shared principles essential to a global ethic:

1. Commitment to a culture of non-violence and respect for life.
2. Commitment to a culture of solidarity and a just economic order.
3. Commitment to a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness.
4. Commitment to a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women.

A global ethic as envisioned by those who drafted this Declaration will require a sense of global citizenship—something unthinkable until recent decades. But with technological advances in communication, the power to connect on a global scale is now upon us. With the appropriate education and vision casting, this could foster a widespread sense of a global society, and as this mindset develops, the possibility for an ethic that transcends individual nations will be feasible.

It should be obvious to all, with the exception of the prejudiced perhaps, that the great religions of the world have contributed significantly to the spiritual and moral progress of humanity. Certainly these religions have also produced vice and scandal, but the overwhelming good promoted by them should not be minimized. Striving for the good life—the moral life—is part and parcel of all the major world religions. Each of them has as its credo an ethic that captures the heart of the global ethic noted above. There exists a moral sense that runs through all faith traditions and cultures, that we have a duty to correct injustice and to promote the good. The power of our universal moral compass, coupled with advances in technology, especially in bioengineering, medicine, electromechanical energy, and robotics, is producing for the first time in world history the opportunity to fundamentally change the world. A number of world leaders are currently in discussions regarding the creation of global institutions that can address international problems of justice, equality, freedom, and the like—all in sync with the basic principles of a global ethic. As our planet continues to become more interdependent, we must strive for shared values. And as the two largest belief systems in the world are theistic, theism will likely play an important role as philosophers and others strive to develop a much needed world ethic.

Third, philosophical theism will likely be in play in discussions of religious pluralism and cross-culturalism in the decades ahead. The early twenty-first century reflects a rich and manifold diversity of religions in the world, and globalization is creating a widespread awareness of this reality. Many of these traditions do not include belief in a God, such as Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism, and the relatively new Falun Gong, Cao Dai, and Neopaganism. But at this time the fastest growing religions worldwide are traditional theistic ones, most notably Christianity and Islam. The existence of multiple

religious beliefs and practices has a long history, of course, but the intermingling of the many unique and sometimes very dissimilar traditions is relatively recent. There was a time when adherents of a particular religion could live their entire lives without having ever experienced someone of another religious tradition. But that is no longer the case. We now live in a global village, and pluralism is a permanent fixture of our world. We have come to the end of the age of monologue and have entered the age of global dialogue (Swidler 2010). We are all neighbors, and this brings tremendous potential for social and individual good. However, we are confronted with a paradox:

It is the best of times and the worst of times. On the one hand, there are more organizations, conferences, and seminars devoted to interreligious dialogue than at any other time in previous history. However, we also live with terrifying animosity between—and within—religions. Hindus and Muslims slaughter each other on the Indian subcontinent. Ultra-Orthodox Jews and radical Muslims aggravate rivalries in Israel and Palestine with claims that Yahweh or Allah has given them the land. Meanwhile, Jews kill Jews and Muslims kill Muslims.

(Cox 2009: 130)

The rising interest in comparative religion by philosophers and theologians in the West has brought about a deeper understanding of, and appreciation for, the different religious traditions. But it has also brought to the fore an awareness of the many conflicting core beliefs among the different traditions. Consider some examples: Muslims affirm a form of theism in which Allah, the one and only God, exists as a distinct reality from human beings and the other created entities, whereas for Advaita Vedantans the concept of Ultimate Reality is pantheistic monism in which only Brahman exists; in Buddhism the salvific goal is nirvana, the extinguishment of the individual self and the complete extinction of all suffering, whereas for the Christian salvation is the ultimate goal in which human beings, as substantial entities, are united with God forever in the afterlife. How are we to respond to this type of diversity of fundamental beliefs? One could deny or minimize the doctrinal conflicts, or one could maintain that doctrine itself is not as important for religious belief and experience and that the great religious traditions are equally authentic responses to Ultimate Reality. Or one could remain committed to the truth of one set of religious teachings while affirming that the different religious traditions are comprised of various experiences and mutually incompatible sets of truth claims, and that the traditions are themselves rooted in distinct worldviews that are incompatible with, if not contradictory to, the other worldviews. Or one could affirm that the central tenets of one religion are true and any claims incompatible with those tenets, including those of other religions, are false. Other options are possible as well (Runzo 1988). Whether one sees religious diversity through the lens of religious pluralism, relativism, exclusivism, or some other view, interreligious and intrareligious dialogue are imperative if we are to live together in peace and unity.

Contrary to the claims of the New Atheists and others, it is not true that theistic religions bring more heartache than handshake. Religion, theistic and otherwise, has produced much good in the world (Sharma 2008; Ward 2006). It is true, however, that fundamentalists from the major *theistic* religions are some of the worst offenders of justice and tolerance. Given this fact, moderates from within these traditions should lead the way in propounding respect, peace, and harmony among those who disagree. This is no easy task and requires a tremendous amount of courage, but moderate Muslims, for

example, should continue to engage in dialogue with Islamic fundamentalists—making the case that such radical views are incongruent with the traditional and humane teachings of Islam (and theists from other traditions should not conflate radical and moderate understandings of the religion; this is an inaccurate and dangerous misread of Islam and Sharia). Further, moderate Christians should engage with fundamentalists from their own as well as other faith traditions. And Jews and other theists should strive to foster an ever-broadening consensus in human rights with the goal that we should all live together in an authentically human manner (Küng 1991). As religious organizations are, in many places, the most influential non-governmental institutions, local interfaith groups can play a significant role in creating such a consensus—keeping the various divisions of the community in dialogue and working toward mutual understanding and cooperative support. As theologian Harvey Cox wisely counsels, in order to make real moral and spiritual advances in this new century, “we need to face in three directions: toward other faiths, toward the ‘other wing’ in our own tradition, and toward the complex political context of our fractured world” (Cox 2009: 139).

As the twenty-first century unfolds, and as humanity grapples with issues of justice, pluralism, internationalism, and universal peace, theistic discourse will no doubt be relevant to the matters at hand among philosophers, theologians, and religious and political leaders. Hopefully this discourse will be fruitful in both *intellectus* and *praxis* and will exemplify the divine selfless love so deeply rooted in the classical teachings of the major theistic traditions.

Related Topics

Chapter 1: Western Philosophy; Chapter 11: Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Intellectual Life; Chapter 13: Evidence; Chapter 14: Naturalism; Chapter 15: Humanities; Chapter 16: Natural Sciences; Chapter 17: Evolution; Chapter 18: Physical Cosmology; Chapter 20: Philosophy of Religion; Chapter 22: Sociology; Chapter 25: Moral Inquiry; Chapter 26: Cognitive Science; Chapter 32: Human Rights; Chapter 36: Religious Diversity; Chapter 37: Globalization; Chapter 54: The Meaning of Life

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- Conway Morris, S. (2003) *Life's Solution: Inevitable Humans in a Lonely Universe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. This leading palaeobiologist argues that the general features of living organisms are written into the very laws of the universe.
- Heim, S. M. (1995) *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion*, New York: Maryknoll. Heim challenges the pluralistic assumption of a single religious end and argues that while religions make exclusivist claims, and should do so, nevertheless we should consider salvation in the plural.
- Meister, C. (ed.), (2010) *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Diversity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. A collection of thirty-two newly commissioned essays on the subject of religious diversity from a widely diverse group of scholars.
- Moser, P. K. (2008) *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Moser examines the issue of divine hiddenness and its implications for philosophy, theology, and the various religious claims to know God.
- Peacocke, A. (2001) *Paths from Science towards God*, Oxford: Oneworld. Argues that God is not distant from the world but intimately involved in it and that science helps to reveal God's purposes and meanings in the world.
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- Soskice, J. M. (2007) *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language*, New York: Oxford University Press. Examines the biblical imagery of God and divine action from a constructivist feminist perspective and points to an eschatological anthropology that reflects the beauty of the divine image.
- Taliaferro, C. (2005) *Evidence and Faith: Philosophy and Religion since the Seventeenth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. An engaging narrative history of the philosophical reflection on religion from the Cambridge Platonists to today; also includes analyses of various positions and movements.
- Ward, K. (2008) *The Big Questions in Science and Religion*, West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Foundation Press. Explores issues at the heart of the science-religion debate, including the central question of whether religion can survive in a scientific age.

Part II

THEISM AND ENQUIRY

13

EVIDENCE

John Bishop

Philosophical discussion of theism typically focuses on the existence of God. Questions about *evidence* then arise in considering *whether it is justifiable* to believe in God, where the answer is assumed to turn on assessing the overall weight of our evidence for and against God's existence. Yet this familiar view of philosophical inquiry into theism needs to be treated with caution. Theism's relation to its evidence exhibits special features.

Theism's Relation to Evidence: the Meaning of God's Existence

The first special feature arises from the difficulty of knowing what is meant by the claim that God exists. Many philosophers assume the "personal omniGod" account of the divine—as typified, for example, by Richard Swinburne's description of God as "[a] person without a body (i.e. a spirit) who is eternal, free, able to do anything [omnipotent], knows everything [omniscient], is perfectly good [omnibenevolent], is the proper object of human worship and obedience, the creator and sustainer of the Universe" (Swinburne 1993: 1). But this conception is not unrivalled. It differs from classical (Thomist) theism, which takes God to be atemporal, immutable, impassible, necessary and simple, and treats our talking of God as "a" person or "an" agent as analogical rather than literal (Burrell 1979). The personal omniGod conception is also in tension with mystical emphasis on the "otherness" of the divine, and with some theological doctrines, such as the Christian understanding of God as a Trinity of persons. There is thus a real question as to what conception of God is adequate to the lived theistic religious traditions: the meaning of "the God hypothesis" is, therefore, not incontestably clear. Correspondingly, it might to some degree be obscure how to identify evidence relevant to its truth.

Theism's Relation to Evidence: The Significance of Revelation

There is, however, a more intrinsic connection between the meaning of "the God hypothesis" and the issue of how evidence bears on its truth. *The theistic religions are religions of revelation.* They hold that God chooses to reveal the divine existence, nature and purposes within human history. Each tradition has its variation on the story of how this revelation has occurred and—it is sometimes held—continues to occur. But, whatever the details, the claim that God exists involves the claim that there is One who self-reveals. Any discussion of theism and evidence needs, therefore, to acknowledge a *theologically loaded* notion of evidence: the evidence we have for God will be, from

the perspective of theistic commitment, whatever it is that God chooses to impart, for God's own purposes, in making those purposes evident to human beings (Moser 2008).

A proper consideration of the justifiability of theistic belief, therefore, requires a sound understanding of how evidence for the divine is understood *from within the perspective of theistic commitment*. Yet the fact that theists believe that God produces evidence of the divine within human history might suggest that the attempt to assess the justifiability of belief in God must become mired in circularity. If the evidence for God is the evidence God chooses to bestow, then perhaps it will be only from within the theistic perspective that evidence for the truth of theism can become apparent. That need not follow, however. The theist's understanding of evidence for the divine might offer prospects for non-circular confirmation of theism—though it is controversial whether those prospects are realized.

General and Special Revelation

How, then, do theists understand God's self-revelation—and, thus, the evidence for God's existence available to finite, created, minds? For theists, reality's becoming known to finite minds is *altogether* under God's providence. *All* knowledge—beyond solipsism, anyway—is, strictly speaking, divinely revealed. But much of this knowledge can be classified as *general* revelation: it can be accessed by human cognitive capacities without any reference to, or trust in, God. As Laplace famously replied to Napoleon: "I had no need of that hypothesis." Science can and should be carried on quite independently of belief in God.

Theists believe, however, that specific knowledge of God's purposes requires *special* revelation. This existentially vital knowledge cannot be accessed by ordinary cognitive faculties. It requires *receiving* what is revealed through God's own initiative in acts such as the calling of Abraham, the Exodus, the giving of the law at Sinai, the witness of the prophets, the Incarnation, the institution of the Church, the delivering of the Qur'an to the Last Prophet (and, of course, the traditions differ over the authenticity and relative significance of these).

God's grace, thus, remains the root source of all knowledge, yet there is a distinction between knowledge certifiable by human understanding and knowledge that can only be received, ultimately on divine authority. That is how things stand *from within the theistic perspective*. What *independent* epistemic support could there be, though, for the justifiability of adopting a theistic perspective in the first place? In other words, what is there that counts for the theist as *general* revelation that could provide, from an initially neutral standpoint, adequate support for belief in God's existence and for specific claims about the vehicles of special revelation?

Natural Theology . . .

The tradition of natural theology offers one answer: though full saving knowledge of God's nature and purposes depends on special revelation, the existence of God may be independently inferred. Christians often justify this claim by quoting Romans 1:20: "[God's] invisible attributes, that is to say his everlasting power and deity, have been visible, ever since the world began, to the eye of reason, in the things he has made" (*New English Bible*). The fact that scriptural warrant is thought necessary reflects long-standing controversy over the religious propriety of natural theology. Many theists have believed that

knowledge of God is entirely dependent on God's revelatory initiative. Others have held that God's goodness would not endow humans with a capacity for critical reason that *generally* assists their flourishing yet has to be set aside when it comes to beliefs about God. Some have then inferred that a good God would ensure that *some* independent evidential support for foundational theistic beliefs would be available to finite minds.

. . . and the Suspicion of Epistemic Circularity

But the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Whether natural theological "proofs" of God's existence satisfy remains moot. Their value might vary, depending on whose hunger is to be satisfied. There are some impressively defended natural theological arguments, such as the contemporary revival of the "Kalām" Cosmological Argument (Craig 1979), or the "new" Teleological Argument from the "fine-tuning" of the fundamental physical constants to allow for a universe in which life is possible (Swinburne 1990). These arguments might vindicate theism as a rationally coherent worldview, by integrating the interpretation of the cosmos as a Creation with our scientific knowledge. But those who seek *independent* evidence for theism might not be satisfied by these arguments. For example, atheist-naturalists might think that the causal principle on which the Kalām depends can be rationally rejected: maybe the universe can, and did, come into existence without any efficient cause (Morriston 2000). Atheist-naturalists might also hold that the fine-tuning is a "brute" fact, which, unsurprisingly, we observe since it is necessary for our existence—or that, if evidence for intelligent design is independently persuasive, it falls well short of showing the existence of the theist God (Sober 2003). It might thus be suspected that natural theological arguments are ultimately epistemically circular, rationally persuasive only to those already implicitly thinking theistically. Of course, just such a circularity will be expected as right and proper by theists who regard as religiously misguided the project of independent rational validation of foundational theist beliefs.

Moral Evidentialism and Theistic Commitment

Circularity of this kind might be bothersome, however, for those who hold that *it is justifiable to take a religious claim to be true only if its truth is adequately supported by one's total available evidence*. This is a formulation of the position known as *evidentialism*, championed in the British empiricist tradition. Locke writes, in Chapter 17 of Book IV of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*:

For he governs his assent right, and places it as he should, who in any case or matter whatsoever, believes or disbelieves, according as reason directs him. He that does otherwise, transgresses against his own light, and misuses those faculties, which were given him to no other end, but to search and follow the clearer evidence, and greater probability.

(Locke 1924: 355)

And Hume famously remarks in his essay "Of Miracles" that "a wise man . . . proportions his belief to the evidence" (Hume 1975: 110). According to W. K. Clifford, the claim that "it is wrong everywhere, always, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence" (Clifford 1879: 186) expresses a *moral* requirement, fundamental to the

ethics of belief. *Moral evidentialism* thus maintains that it is unethical to accept theistic belief without adequate evidence for its truth.

Moral evidentialism may seem too demanding: surely believing beyond, or even against, the weight of our evidence is not uncommon, and not inevitably *morally* at fault? We simply inherit many beliefs, and yet do no moral wrong though we could not cite adequate evidence for their truth. As for believing *against* the evidence, that might also be acceptable on occasion: can it not, for example, be virtuous to continue to believe in the loyalty of a friend even in the face of weighty contrary evidence?

Belief, Obligation and Control

The very idea of an “ethics of belief” may seem suspect, however. Obligations apply, surely, only to what is within the sphere of an agent’s control. Yet beliefs are essentially responsive, unable to be generated just at will.

Some epistemologists thus present evidentialism as an “internalist” thesis about epistemic justification—as the claim that a person’s belief is justified when and only when it is adequately supported by, and founded on, the evidence available to that person (Conee and Feldman 2004). That thesis says nothing about what we ought *to do* in relation to our beliefs. Yet “classical” evidentialists—Locke, Hume and Clifford, for example—*did* think that our believing can carry epistemic and moral obligations, and that this applies importantly to our religious commitments. This theme has been urged in our own day by the “new atheists,” such as Dawkins (2008) and Hitchens (2007). Religious belief is something to which people *are not entitled*, they maintain. Human existence would be improved if we grew out of our religious tendencies—“God is not great,” and “religion poisons everything,” as the title of Hitchens’ book has it.

How can sense be made, then, of the classical evidentialists’ idea that we have obligations in relation to our religious beliefs? What is *active* about our believing, with respect to which questions of obligation might arise? We do have *indirect* control over the formation of some of our beliefs: there is nothing problematic about an ethics of inquiry that enjoins diligence in searching for and attending to evidence. But we also have *direct* control over what propositions we take to be true in our practical reasoning—over *what beliefs or assumptions we act upon*, in other words. A person believes, let us suppose, that Jesus is her personal Savior. Her believing is a psychological *state*—the attitude towards a certain proposition that it is true—and the degree to which her evidence supports this attitude can be assessed. But the person also *acts* on her belief: she makes a public acknowledgment of accepting the salvation offered in Jesus, she changes her way of life, giving a tenth of her wealth to the poor, joining in political action promoting certain moral causes, and so on. These are acts for which she is responsible, and which are open to moral assessment. Each of these acts involves practical commitment to the truth of her belief. That practical commitment is directly under her control, and the question arises whether she is entitled to it. The question whether it is permissible for her to take her religious belief to be true in practice is a moral question, since her acting on her belief influences how she lives her life in relation to others (her belief could hardly be a genuinely *religious* belief if this were not so).

The moral evidentialist maintains, then, that it is morally permissible for a person to take a religious belief to be true in practice only if so doing is within that person’s *epistemic* rights, and that this in turn requires that the person’s belief be adequately supported by, and founded upon, her total available evidence. The obligation the

evidentialist affirms, then, can be understood as relating primarily, not to *states* of belief, but to *acts* of practical commitment to the truth of held beliefs.

Epistemic Concern and Religious Commitment

There is a strong *prima facie* case for moral evidentialism as applied to religious beliefs. Evidentialism might not, of course, apply with absolute uniformity. Like most sound principles, it can be overridden in exceptional cases. If, somehow, the welfare of many people would be improved if only I let myself act on a belief whose truth I recognize not to be adequately supported by my evidence, it would surely be wrong to let evidentialist scruples hold me back. But when it comes to commitment to religious (and similar) beliefs—something that affects a person's *whole orientation* to life in the world—it is essential that the epistemic concern to grasp the truth and avoid error not be overridden. We cannot expect to flourish if we base our lives on falsehoods, nor, indeed, if we fail to grasp vital truths about our existence in the world.

Epistemic concern need not be “imposed from without” on theistic faith—on the contrary, it is endemic to it. Avoiding idolatry is imperative: theists recoil from the idea of worshipping something that falls short of the true God. As Paul Tillich puts it, they fear giving their “ultimate concern” to what is, in fact, a “false ultimate.” So every theist seeks the truth about what it is that deserves worship and “promises total fulfillment even if all other claims have to be subjected to it or rejected in its name” (Tillich 2001: 1 and see 21). Every theist should, therefore, care that her commitment to the existence of God—of *this* God, revealed thus and so—is something she does *with epistemic entitlement*, through the right exercise of her epistemic capacities. Moral evidentialism maintains that one acts on a religious belief with epistemic entitlement only if that belief is based on evidence recognized as adequately supporting its truth. Unless the *prima facie* case in favor of this claim can be overturned, ethical theists must satisfy themselves that their beliefs are evidentially justified.

Can Theists Meet the Moral Evidentialist Demand . . . and What Exactly Is It?

Theistic commitment is permissible—the moral evidentialist claims—only if the beliefs acted upon are held with adequate support. But what counts as “adequate” support? Against what standard of adequacy do theists need to assess their evidence to determine whether they meet this demand?

There is, of course, evidence both for and against God's existence. A particular piece of evidence might support the claim that God exists, while another piece of evidence countervails. The evidence of the fine-tuning of the fundamental physical constants, for example, might raise the probability of the existence of an Intelligent Designer, and so of the existence of a theistic God. Yet the evidence of apparently pointless suffering might make it less likely that a morally perfect God exists. The notion of adequate support that the moral evidentialist has in mind is thus the notion of adequate support by one's *total* available evidence when weighed together.

But what *standard* of adequate total evidential support is implied? An answer to this important question can be approached first by reflecting on an important limitation to natural theology, and then by considering the influential “Reformed” epistemology of religious belief.

Natural Theological Evidence—an Important Limitation

Since natural theology attempts to show theistic belief reasonable by inference from general features of the natural world, it might be thought that a successful natural theological argument would meet the evidentialist demand. In fact, that is not the case. A successful natural theological argument would indeed display evidence that supports theistic belief. But it would not provide *adequate* support for *fully religious* theistic belief. The reason is that religious theists are “expanded” theists: their beliefs include tradition-specific “creedal” claims about what is divinely revealed. At best our evidence about the natural world might show that there is a First Cause, an Intelligent Designer, even a Necessary Being; it seems unfitted for the task of supporting creedal beliefs, such as that God is Triune or that God became incarnate in Jesus. Traditionally, creedal beliefs have been understood as held on the basis of authority, and the evidentialist requirement has been thought to be met by appeal to adequate evidence for the authoritativeness of the sources used. Persons of theistic faith may thus hold creedal beliefs beyond what they could independently verify, but not beyond what is justified on the basis of their evidence.

Evidence for the Authority of a Source: Appeal to Miracles

Can adequate evidence be provided, then, for taking a particular source as authoritative—a question made pressing by the diversity of religious traditions? A standard answer has been that the evidence of miracles could do so: a source’s association with supernatural intervention signals divine endorsement. It is doubtful, however, whether it could ever be justifiable to believe that a miraculous intervention had occurred: Hume famously argues that such a belief could never justifiably be held on the basis of testimony, “unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact, which it endeavors to establish” (Hume 1975: 116). But even if it could, in principle, be reasonable to believe a miracle had occurred, it remains doubtful whether we have adequate evidence for any *actual* miracle claims, especially when they compete in endorsing different purported sources of mutually incompatible revelations. The evidentialist Locke thought the truths of Christianity reasonable on the authority of Jesus, whose status was attested by miracles (Locke 1997). But that view might rest on a prior inclination to accept Christian miracle stories in the absence of any independent means of showing them better evidentially justified than (say) the Muslim claim to the great miracle of the Qur’an itself.

Appeal to “Moral” Evidence

Some have suggested that evidence for theism includes a type of “moral” evidence (for example, Helm 2000), and this might be relevant here. Belief in the authority of Jesus need not be based *solely* on miracles, but on the whole story of Jesus’ living and dying, and an assessment of that life as morally and spiritually outstanding. Once again, however, epistemic circularity looms. A Muslim’s evidence for accepting the Islamic revelation might include being similarly impressed with the life and character of the Prophet—and, even more importantly, *with the worth of what was conveyed through him*.

Maybe that is the nub of the matter. Perhaps the evidence that adequately confirms the authoritativeness of the source is *the very worthiness of the teachings thereby*

conveyed. Yet since distinct teachings are found equally expressive of the highest ideals by adherents of different traditions, they could *each* reasonably suppose they have this kind of evidence. And where the different sources license mutually incompatible beliefs they cannot *in fact* be equally authoritative. So this kind of evidence seems not to be adequate—not, anyway, for showing that any one version of theism is justified where it disagrees with others. Theists believe, it seems, that their own tradition’s teachings are good and right because they adhere to that tradition: they do not commit themselves to a tradition because they independently judge its teachings good and right.

Could it be the other way round, though? Could one begin from a neutral stance and become committed through moral approbation of the teachings of a particular tradition? If so, then perhaps there *could* be adequate moral evidence for taking one source rather than others as authoritative, and, hence, for the truth of what that source reveals. For this to be possible, however, there would need to be a source of moral authority independent of religious commitment that turned out, furthermore, to favor the moral worth of one set of doctrines over the others. Even if the Kantian project of deriving normative ethics from the consistent exercise of practical reason succeeded, it seems unlikely that this further condition would be met. The idea that *independent* moral considerations might show, for example, that God’s being Absolutely One is a better way for the world to be than for God to be Triune, or conversely, seems far-fetched.

The Evidence of Religious Experience

Natural theological and moral evidence can support theistic belief, then. Indeed, reflective religious theists routinely find their beliefs made evident to them in both these ways. The question remains, however, whether these ways of “making evident” are adequate *in the sense the evidentialist has in mind*. They seem not to be so, *if* adequate evidence for theistic religious commitment must show the relevant creedal beliefs to be true *as against* alternatives, and must do so, as well, from a starting point free of assumptions that belong to a theistic worldview. But *is* that what adequacy requires? The question of what standard of adequacy is implied in the evidentialist demand still needs an answer.

That answer might perhaps emerge by recognizing that a further way in which theists find their beliefs made evident is *through their own (religious) experience*. The significance of this potential source of evidence has become more prominent in the epistemology of religious belief in recent decades, and an approach known as “Reformed epistemology” has taken center stage.

Reformed Epistemology and the Appeal to the Evidence of Experience

Reformed epistemology has two main themes: first, the theme of “parity” between “basic” religious beliefs and other basic beliefs to which it is universally agreed we are entitled; and, second, the theme of “positive epistemic status” conferred on a belief through conditions “external” to the believer’s perspective.

One version of the first theme is the suggestion that religious beliefs can arise from experience in a manner comparable with perceptual beliefs. Perceptual beliefs are not supported by evidence in the sense of *inferential* evidence—that is, their truth is not inferred from other “grounding” justified beliefs. Perceptual beliefs are, in other words, *basic* beliefs. They might also be *properly* basic—that is, they could have positive

epistemic status, worth having in the business of gaining truth and avoiding error. Another version of the first theme focuses on beliefs that frame our whole experience of the world, such as our beliefs that our perceptions are of an external reality, that there are other minds, and that the past is real. These beliefs seem not to result from inference but, rather, to be posits brought to the interpretation of experience. Comparably, then, with either of these types of belief, religious beliefs not held by inference from more basic beliefs could also have epistemic worth (see Alston 1991; Plantinga 1981).

But how is it possible for basic beliefs to possess epistemic worth? It might be suggested that beliefs produced by or in experience are justified by *those very experiences*. Yet individual experiences might seem too subjective—or, more radically, just not in the right kind of category—to provide a proper epistemic ground. Accordingly, an *externalist* account might be preferred: what confers epistemic worth on basic beliefs is just their being *produced by the right kind of causal mechanism*—for example, one that reliably yields true beliefs or that has so doing as its proper function. This, then, is the second theme in Reformed epistemology: a religious belief can possess “externalist” epistemic status *while lacking evidential justification altogether*.

Is there good reason, though, to think that religious beliefs *actually do* possess epistemic status in this way? Alvin Plantinga holds that, if Christianity is true, then the Christian’s beliefs, including the creedal ones, will have “warrant” and count as knowledge on externalist grounds. This is so, he argues, because it is highly likely that God would instill the Gospel truths by means of a special cognitive faculty designed for just that purpose (Plantinga 2000). A cognitive faculty restricted to producing adherence to a single set of doctrines might seem unusual (compared with perceptual faculties that differentially yield a vast range of beliefs across varying environments): nevertheless, it would be hard to deny that beliefs *actually* caused by God to ensure we hold the truth must be rated epistemically rock solid.

The possibility that basic theistic beliefs possess a rock solid epistemic status that would be apparent from an external (God’s eye) view is, however, only that—a possibility. Reflective theists who seek assurance that they *actually are* entitled to their commitments will at best get only as far as recognizing that, *if* God does indeed exist, then their basic beliefs about God will have warrant. But, since their concern is about whether they are entitled to believe in God in the first place, relying just on this recognition introduces epistemic circularity.

Comparing Evidential Practices

An externalist “justification” for commitment to the truth of basic religious beliefs might be epistemically circular—but an externalist account of the epistemic worth of our perceptual beliefs will be equally so. If we have no concern about our entitlement to take basic perceptual beliefs to be true, should we not be similarly unbothered about our basic religious beliefs? That depends on just how comparable our perceptual and religious “doxastic” practices can be understood to be.

People implicitly accept shared norms in forming, revising, and evaluating beliefs and in using them in reasoning. In carrying out these belief-related activities—sometimes deliberately, often habitually—we find ourselves operating within an established (doxastic) practice, with intersubjective agreement on a vast range of judgments (though articulated understanding of the normative basis for these judgments might be difficult to attain, partial and contestable). This includes an *evidential practice* that implicitly

specifies norms governing *inter alia* (i) the degree to which a given body of evidence indicates that a given proposition is true, and (ii) what might count as properly basic evidence—evidence that can be admitted as foundational, without being grounded on right inference from what is already accepted.

There are, of course, established *religious* evidential practices—many of them. Given their foundational commitment to sources of revelation, theistic evidential practices have distinctive norms relating to the right interpretation of what the chosen authoritative sources deliver. But they also admit some theistic beliefs as properly basic and foundational. Whether these include quasi-perceptual beliefs formed in an individual's religious experience might be contested, but it is clear that all theistic traditions take certain *framing principles* to be properly foundational. These framing principles have the form that God exists and is authoritatively revealed thus and so, where “thus and so” is differently filled out for each separate tradition.

What is markedly different about theistic evidential practices, however, is that they are *relatively local* by comparison with the evidential practice that allows (undefeated) basic beliefs formed through sensory perception to be accepted as basically evident. There is *global* human involvement in our perceptual evidential practice, whereas involvement in a theistic evidential practice is an option some take up—though acculturation can make it more or less inevitable that people in particular historical situations form beliefs in accordance with it. Yet people with inherited religious beliefs are certainly able to cease to act on them and might then come no longer to hold them. By contrast, there is no practical possibility, short of severe dysfunction, of repudiating our sensory perceptual evidential practice, however intellectually impressed we might be by skeptical arguments.

Adherents to a specific theistic religious tradition, then, when they reflect on this *disparity* between their own (for example) Christian evidential practice and our common perceptual evidential practice, will find their concern about entitlement still unmet. Their foundational Christian beliefs, they will be pleased to agree, could possibly have “externalist” epistemic status (if what causes them to have those beliefs is indeed intended by God to ensure they grasp the truth), but—since it is genuinely open to them no longer to commit themselves in practice to the truth of these beliefs—the question whether they are morally and epistemically entitled to continue in that commitment remains a real question, and a question not satisfactorily answered by appeal to the externalist possibility alone.

Summary: the Range of Supporting Evidence for Religious Theistic Commitments

There are, then, at least the following ways in which religious theists may consider their beliefs supported:

1. by natural theological evidence—for a part, but only a part, of what they believe (the existence of an Intelligent Designer, a Necessary Being, and so on);
2. by evidence for the authoritativeness of the revelatory sources they accept, and hence for the truth of the doctrines thereby revealed;
3. by evidence of the moral worthiness of the teachings and worldview conveyed by their revelatory sources;
4. by the evidence of their own experience of the divine presence, challenging, forgiving, healing, transforming, strengthening;

5. by reflecting that their basic and foundational beliefs (formed quasi-perceptually in experience, or functioning as principles that frame their overall experience of the world) could possibly be caused in a way that gives them positive epistemic status—and, arguably, that this is likely to be the case if the God they believe to be revealed does indeed exist.

Evidentialism as Presupposing a Universal Evidential Practice

Nevertheless, evidentialists may maintain that evidence in these five categories (even when taken cumulatively) is not sufficient to meet the demand that theistic religious commitment be adequately evidentially supported. To see why, the foundational commitments of evidentialism itself need to be uncovered.

Evidentialism assumes a universalist vision of a shared human endeavor to gain knowledge to which any “normally functioning” human can, in principle, contribute. In addition, evidentialism assumes that “human inquiry” involves a universally applicable evidential practice, and the evidentialist requirement employs the notion of adequate evidential support as judged according to the norms of that universal practice.

That provides a functional definition of what the evidentialist means by adequate evidential support—namely, adequacy relative to the norms of our (assumed) universal evidential practice. Providing a substantive account of those norms is difficult and controversial. Notoriously, skepticism results when the standards are set as high as austere rationality seems to demand. Confirming that the scientific method does indeed advance empirical knowledge requires compromising our purest intuitions about how to guarantee truth. It seems that we must risk falling into error in order to grasp truth; and it seems that anything we count as known on the basis of adequate evidential support will be fallible, subject to being subsequently shown not to have been knowledge at all.

Yet it might still be true that we do have an established, widely inclusive, practice that seeks to apply universal norms of evidential support, even though we cannot (and perhaps, in principle, could not) give a complete and agreed account of what those norms are. Most importantly, no such account is needed to see the force of the evidentialist challenge to religious believers that they not cut themselves off from our common evidential practice. Taking it to be true that God is revealed will, of course, be adequately supported relative to local theistic evidential practice. But such a commitment is not innate (as it is innate for us to take there to be other minds, an external world, etc.). So there is a real question whether any step of religious commitment ought to be taken—a question that belongs to human inquiry and which is to be settled (the evidentialist says) by establishing whether that step is adequately supported according to the norms of our most inclusive evidential practice.

Avoiding Epistemological Isolation

How do reflective theists stand, then, with respect to our widest evidential practice? They do have evidence that supports their religious beliefs (five varieties have been noted above). But perhaps these forms of evidential support are isolated from our widest evidential practice. As suspicions of epistemic circularity suggest, perhaps some, or even all, of the evidence on which theists rely gives support only from inside the perspective of a specific religious commitment.

Theists show themselves not to be epistemological isolationists, however, if they feel the need to respond to “outside” evidence against the truth of theism. Potential “defeaters” for theistic belief are well known: the most significant is the existence of apparently pointless serious suffering by humans and other sentient beings (Rowe 1979). But theists might reply to this “Argument from Evil”—for example, by insisting that there must be, albeit beyond our ken, some morally acceptable reason for God to permit suffering that seems pointless to us (Wykstra 1984). If that (or some other) reply is successful, and if theists also have successful replies to other potential defeaters (such as the fact of the sheer diversity of religious beliefs), they will show that belief in God is, in its own terms, a rationally defensible position. When they accept the obligation to deal with potential defeaters, then, theists show that they take seriously how their commitments measure up from “the outside.”

Taking the outside view seriously to this extent is not enough for evidentialists, however. Acceptable religious commitment, they maintain, must be rationally *compelling* from the outside context of our most inclusive evidential practice: “you may not commit until your reason commits you!” Some philosopher-theists seek to show that they obey that command. Swinburne’s project is of this kind: he takes Bayesian inductive probability as central to the norms of our common evidential practice, and argues that, under those norms, theistic—and, indeed, specifically Christian—belief is justified as more probably true than not, so that the wise who proportion their beliefs to their evidence should be, or come to be, Christian theists (see Swinburne 1994, 2001, 2004).

The Challenge of Evidential Ambiguity

The project of establishing that our total available evidence makes theism independently rationally persuasive faces the problem of apparent evidential ambiguity, however. Arguably, all the evidence admissible under our widest evidential practice is equally coherently interpretable both under the assumption of theism and under the assumption of atheist-naturalism. (Indeed, the ambiguity could be multiple: distinct expanded theist positions might equally well fit all that human inquiry counts as the available evidence.) Theism and atheism might be, in other words, like different *gestalts* on the same image, equally well seen as a duck or as a rabbit (see McKim 2001; Penelhum 1993). Evidential ambiguity would explain the persistence of the debate over theism, with people of equal acumen and integrity on either side. It would explain why, whenever evidence is boldly claimed to be decisive by one side, the other side seems able to accommodate it.

A deeper reason for the evidential ambiguity, however, is that both theism and atheist-naturalism offer total interpretations of the world of our experience, so that in principle there could be no neutral standing place from which the choice between them could be assessed in terms of independent evidence (Hick 1989). Theists will, of course, have to respond to the intriguing argument that the evidential ambiguity of theism is, itself, higher-order evidence against believing in a God who desires relationship with humans (Schellenberg 1993). But a successful defense against this “Argument from Divine Hiddenness” would do no more than reinstate theism as a defensible position—the evidential ambiguity will remain, and so too the charge that theistic commitment fails the evidentialist demand.

Questioning Moral Evidentialism about Theistic Belief

Theist philosophers might accept evidentialism—but they will then be committed to breaking the deadlock of apparent evidential ambiguity. Perhaps, though, adherence to theistic beliefs might be justifiable as “a matter of faith,” proceeding beyond independent evidence. If so, theists have an alternative: namely, to accept that the ambiguity is real and resist the evidentialist demand.

Since, as noted above, evidentialism rests on certain foundational commitments, it might be undermined by questioning those foundations. Questioning the “grand meta-narrative” of human inquiry is a familiar “post-modernist” trope. Yet the notion that there is nothing more to inquiry than local practices with “socially constructed” norms yields an epistemological relativism that theists, anyway, should decisively reject. Theists essentially see humanity as one under God and as achieving knowledge through actively receiving both general and special divine revelation, where these are ultimately integrated with one another. The notion that human knowledge can be attained through a universally shared human enterprise is itself a theistic notion, even though it can be—and since the Enlightenment has been—detached from its religious context and treated just as part of the ethos of natural scientific inquiry.

Many evidentialists thus forget the theistic origins of their commitment to a single human practice of “scientific” inquiry. That is no reason, however, for theists themselves to repudiate that commitment in response to evidentialist attack. Some theists have, however, settled for the only legitimacy post-modernist relativism can afford theism, namely as one among many ways of culturally “constructing” the world. But the theological anti-realism that results, for which God is the humanly constructed mythical symbol of our greatest ideals (Cupitt 1980), gives up on a vital theistic idea: the universality—the catholicity—of potential human access to the one reality that is the Creation of the One God. (The monotheistic religious traditions are essentially catholic, with a small “c,” because they aim for no less than a total interpretation of the world and how to live in it that includes all humanity across all time and space.)

Theists should, therefore, not reject the evidentialist’s vision of shared human inquiry, nor of a universal evidential practice. It does not follow, however, that they need accept the evidentialist insistence that foundational religious commitment must be independently endorsed under our widest evidential practice. Theism might be evidentially ambiguous, yet that might not be enough to show that making a theistic commitment is to abandon human inquiry in defiance of “our duty to mankind,” as Clifford dramatically puts it (James 1956: 8). This is because the human endeavor to achieve the epistemic goal need not reduce to believing exclusively according to what is permissible under our widest, most inclusive, evidential practice. One might remain steadfast in one’s duty to seek truth and avoid error, and to respect the weight of one’s total available evidence, and yet—under certain conditions, anyway—decisively take to be true without independent evidential support foundational claims of the religious kind. That is, one might permissibly make a “doxastic venture,” by taking to be true a foundational religious claim whose truth one recognizes not to be secured under our most widely shared evidential practice. William James’ controversial “justification of faith” in his lecture “The Will to Believe” can be understood as an attempt to justify faith as doxastic venture:

[N]ot only as a matter of fact do we find our passional nature influencing us in our opinions, but . . . there are some options between opinions in which this

influence must be regarded both as an inevitable and as a lawful determinant of our choice.

(James 1956: 19)

James argues that evidentialism must allow some limited venturing beyond evidence—namely, the venture that commits to the truth of the evidentialist principle itself (a truth that does not seem inferable from more basic assumptions that do not already implicitly include it). James tells his audience:

Two first steps of passion you have indeed had to admit as necessary—we must think so as to avoid duplicity, and we must think so as to gain truth; but the surer path to these ideal consummations, you will probably consider, is from now onwards to take no further passionate step.

(James 1956: 19)

Once it is admitted that some foundational commitments can be made “passionally”—without the endorsement of independent evidence—it might seem arbitrary and ungenerous to deny their permissibility in the religious case. The door need not be left open, however, to just any ventures beyond the evidence: important constraints apply. If theists retain their commitment to one human quest for the truth under God, and hence to a single inclusive practice for assessing beliefs in the light of evidence, they must respect whatever, according to that practice, the evidence shows. So well-established scientific theories cannot be overridden by a contrary “faith.” Theistic commitment ventures *beyond* the evidence; it ought not proceed against it.

Multiple religious or ideological options remain, however, for total interpretations of the world that cohere equally well with all our available scientific and common sense evidence. A defense of theistic religious commitment as proceeding beyond our common independent evidence must, therefore, be pluralist. It must allow that distinct and mutually incompatible commitments might be equally permissible. Some such commitments might be excluded on moral grounds—though our factual evidence might leave them open, our evaluative evidence might tell against them (consider, for example, someone who conscientiously takes there to be “Nazi gods” who enjoin racial purity). Yet a plurality of admissible commitments will certainly remain. Accordingly, reflective Christian believers (say) will need to acknowledge that, if their faith ventures are legitimate, epistemically and morally, then so too are those of Jews and Muslims, adherents of non-theistic religions such as classical Buddhism, and, of course, scientific naturalists and atheists. From a theist’s perspective, then, the pluralism entailed by defending religious commitment as venturing beyond the evidence must suggest that God’s revelatory purposes are served by a diversity of voices, at significant points in real tension with one another. Defending decisive theistic commitment in the face of acknowledged evidential ambiguity (under our widest evidential practice) might thus have implications for our understanding of the theology of revelation (King 2008).

Conclusion

Is there evidence for the truth of theism? Yes! But that evidence might be enough to show only that theistic commitment is *a* reasonable position, not that everyone engaged in human inquiry ought rationally to adopt it. Indeed, theism might offer so

all-encompassing a view of the world and our engagement with it that there could not, even in principle, be evidence that independently confirmed it. The practical decision to commit to the truth of a theistic worldview could not, then, be understood as the exercise of a purely rational epistemic capacity—it must have, to revive James’ term, some “passional” element to it (see Wynn 2005). If that is so, then theists could properly reject the moral evidentialist demand as applied to their own commitments—and if they are then widely misunderstood as downgrading respect for evidence, well, so be it (persisting in the face of misunderstanding—and worse—is, for the theist religious traditions, a familiar mark of authenticity). Theists who acknowledge their own doxastic venturing should be prepared, however, to excise exclusivist tendencies in their own traditions that fail to acknowledge that others might be equally justified in making their own different, incompatible, foundational doxastic ventures.

Theism and evidence, then, are related because there is evidence that supports the truth of theistic beliefs—though that evidence is arguably sufficient only to show that theistic commitment is *a reasonable* stance, not *a rationally compelling* one. There seems to be a deeper relation between theism and evidence, however—a relation in which theism “grounds” evidence, rather than the converse. Theism, that is to say, *justifies* the claim that reality discloses itself to us in such a way that there can be such a thing as common human inquiry, and an inclusively shared practice of evaluating beliefs in the light of evidence. But these, of course, are the foundational commitments of the evidentialists. There is irony, then, when evidentialists attack theism, since (to recall a remark of Nietzsche’s) while they insist that it is rational to take it that God is dead, they remain deeply attached to his shadow (Nietzsche 1974: 167).

Related Topics

Chapter 1: Western Philosophy; Chapter 10: Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Intellectual Life; Chapter 11: Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Intellectual Life; Chapter 12: Twenty-first-Century Intellectual Life; Chapter 16: Natural Sciences; Chapter 19: Philosophical Methodology; Chapter 20: Philosophy of Religion; Chapter 28: Arguments from Evil; Chapter 29: Religious Experience; Chapter 30: Arguments About Human Persons; Chapter 36: Religious Diversity

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- James, W. (1919 [1896]) "The Will to Believe," in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, London: Longmans, Green, and Co. Also a good starting point on the central issue of moral evidentialism.
- Johnston, M. (2009) *Saving God: Religion After Idolatry*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. A highly stimulating discussion, whether or not one sympathizes with the Heideggerian conception of divinity that Johnston himself proposes.
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- Wolterstorff, N. (1996) *John Locke and the Ethics of Belief*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. An influential contemporary study, focusing on Locke.

14

NATURALISM

Robin Collins

The most important contemporary challenge to theism in the Western world is naturalism. In this chapter, I first consider theism and then naturalism, mostly focusing on the challenges raised to each position. Finally, in the third section, I offer a middle way between the two extremes that arguably captures much of what theists care about.

Theism

Defining Theism

Broadly understood, theism consists of the following claims: (i) there is a single, unified, and unbounded source and sustainer of all non-divine contingent reality; (ii) this source can be appropriately described using categories and properties involving personhood (for example, consciousness, intellect, agency, and reasons) and value (specifically the moral good), though traditionally many theists have claimed that God's nature transcends these categories and properties as we understand them; and (iii) the world is in some sense distinct from the Divine (a claim which distinguishes theism from pantheism and certain forms of idealism). Further, all theistic traditions assert that the highest good for human beings is to be in proper relation to Divine Reality, though how that is understood varies—for example, it might be understood as harmony with the Divine Will or alternatively as mystical union with the Divine.

One familiar definition of theism is the thesis that there exists an all-powerful, omniscient, eternal/everlasting, perfectly free, omnipresent, and perfectly good being that created and sustains all things. Although most thinkers in the Abrahamic religions (that is, in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) would subscribe to this definition, many would claim that it is misleading since it conjures up the image of God as being “beyond” the universe instead of the ground of the universe's existence. Further, many leading theistic thinkers would claim that this definition can mislead one into thinking that God's attributes are just infinite versions of familiar attributes (such as power and knowledge) ascribed to finite agents. They would, therefore, claim that it fails to recognize that God's essential nature is beyond any adequate human description. To include all major versions of theism, therefore, it is better to understand theism in the more general terms presented by the three claims above.

Motivations and Challenges for Theism

The God of theism is supposed to provide an ultimate explanation of the universe and various features of it, such as its orderliness, without as much need for an explanation of God's existence and creation of the world. Traditionally, God's playing this explanatory role was offered as one of the primary justifications for theistic belief because many find the claim that the universe and its order exists as a brute fact extraordinarily puzzling, if not incoherent—see, for example, Swinburne (2004) and my discussion of this with regard to the laws of nature in Collins (2009b). Indeed, if God did not provide such an ultimate explanation, it is difficult to see why we would have any more reason to believe in the theistic God than one of the gods of polytheism, such as Zeus. To play this role, however, means that God cannot be too much like other finite beings since then God would be as much in need of explanation as them. A crucial way in which God is claimed to be different is that God's essential nature is said to be infinite in the sense of being unbounded or unlimited. Such an appeal to an infinite being as an explanation, however, is going to be significantly different from any other kind of explanation we find in science or everyday life since these always involve finite entities that are not ultimate. Accordingly, serious questions regarding the coherence and explanatory content of such an explanation will be unavoidable as one cannot merely appeal to the presumed coherence and content of mundane kinds of explanation and then say that explanation involving God explains in the same way. As noted by Goetz and Taliaferro (2008: 94), other than the problem of evil (which we will briefly discuss in the last section of this chapter), the main reason naturalists give for rejecting theism is purported philosophical problems with God's serving this explanatory role.

To get an idea of the difficulty of these explanatory issues, first note that it seems that in order for God to explain the finite world, God's infinity must in some sense include the finite. This inclusion is virtually always thought of as involving the existence of "divine ideas," with those ideas thought of as in some ways "representing" or "instantiating" the possible complete configurations of reality—configurations contemporary philosophers would call "possible worlds." The existence of these divine ideas, however, runs into direct conflict with another strand of thought: if the essence of the finite is being in some sense bounded or limited, and this is what ultimately makes it in need of explanation, then one is naturally led to think that Divine Reality must be internally distinction-less. Otherwise, it seems that Divine Reality must have some internal structure since the essence of something's being structured is to have boundaries between its "parts," even if those "parts" are merely properties. This view of Divine Reality as distinction-less was called the doctrine of Divine Simplicity, and was common to much of the Medieval conception of God, whether that of Christianity, Judaism, or Islam. Advocates of Divine Simplicity, however, did not want to deny that God included these "possible worlds" (or at least representations of them), since otherwise God could not explain the finite world. Instead, they claimed that God included them in a completely unified way that transcends our ability to grasp.

Since applying concepts involves making distinctions, advocates of Divine Simplicity claimed that human concepts could not positively grasp God; indeed, this idea was commonly held even by those who rejected Divine Simplicity. Nonetheless, many claimed that human reason pointed to the existence of a Divine Being as the necessary condition for the intelligibility of the world. This is analogous to how Immanuel Kant claimed that the subject of conscious experience (the "I," which he called the

“transcendental ego”) could not be grasped via any set of positive concepts; nonetheless, he claimed that since there could not be any experiences without an experiencer, it is a necessary postulate of reason. Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), the great medieval theologian and philosopher, is a good representative of this tradition. According to Aquinas, only a reality that is fully actual—that is, pure being—could provide the “reality” needed for the movement from potentiality to actuality that is the defining feature of change in the world. Thus, for Aquinas, change is unintelligible without God, which he defines as “pure being” or “complete actuality.” Further, he claimed that God’s existence is self-explanatory because, as pure being, God is distinctionless; thus his essence (that which defines what God is) is identical to God’s existence, and hence it is impossible for God not to exist—put differently, it is impossible for pure being not to exist since its nature is existence itself (Aquinas, *Compendium Theologiae*, chapters 6, 11).

The idea of Divine Simplicity gives rise to several serious problems. First, it is unclear if it is logically coherent. Second, it is difficult to see how God could be a Person instead of just an undifferentiated It. Finally, the scientific revolution was largely founded on the idea that a non-vacuous explanation must to some extent show *how* one thing explains another. To use a classic example, to explain why a substance puts one to sleep, it is not sufficient merely to say that it has the power to do so. Instead, a non-vacuous explanation will provide an account of its sleep-producing ability in terms of a combination of some underlying mechanisms or laws. Yet, since God’s nature cannot be positively conceived, it is hard to see how God could provide an explanation that meets this criterion. So, advocates of Divine Simplicity are left with rejecting this notion of explanation and the difficult challenge of coming up with some attractive alternative.

The above difficulties perhaps can be ameliorated by claiming that there are distinctions within God. Nonetheless, considerable challenges still remain regarding God as an ultimate explanation. First, hypothesizing that God has truly distinct properties makes it more difficult to account for why God’s existence is self-explanatory, particularly since one cannot appeal to God’s existence being identical to God’s essence: for example, why is it more plausible to suppose that an entity or reality with the specific attributes of God—omniscience, omnipotence, perfect goodness, and the like—exists as the ultimate reality instead of a reality/being with some other set of attributes, or just the universe itself? Without some kind of answer to this question, there is no reason to postulate God as the ultimate explanation of the universe.

Second, one is still left with providing some answer to the explanatory vacuity charge. In response, contemporary theistic philosophers often appeal to the idea of “agent causation”; that is, a primitive kind of causal agency which according to some philosophers is unique to the actions of persons. The problem is that God’s agency is able to directly bring about events in the world that exactly correspond to God’s intentions, whereas humans cannot do this. At best, we are able to directly bring about our *own* mental states (such as the state of *intending* to lift a glass of water), or perhaps a brain state that, via some law of nature, gives rise to an event in the world corresponding to our intention. Thus God’s agency is not merely an unlimited version of our agency, but qualitatively different. This kind of difficulty has led to a standard critique of theism as being explanatorily vacuous, a mere “placeholder for an explanation” (Nagel 2001: 132–3), though Nagel admits that in his case this verdict is perhaps due to “my inadequate understanding of religious concepts” (2001: 76). (For further examples of this kind of critique, see Colin McGinn (1999: 86) and Jan Narveson (2003), though many other examples could be cited.)

A theist could reply that scientific explanations often invoke qualitatively new powers—such as the power of electric repulsion—so that this alone does not make theism explanatorily vacuous. Nonetheless, the challenge remains of showing how God’s explaining the world is non-vacuous. This, in turn, involves addressing deep fundamental issues regarding the nature of explanation and one’s conception of God. Finally, even if these challenges could be met, other issues are problematic for the idea of God as an ultimate explanation. For example, as is well known from mathematics, infinities raise a host of challenging conceptual problems: thus, for instance, atheists often claim that ascribing certain kinds of infinite attributes to God—such as omniscience and omnipotence—leads to various incoherencies.

Because of the above and other purported problems, atheists often claim that appealing to God as an ultimate explanation of the universe introduces more problems than it solves. David Lewis, for example, claims that theistic explanations are “to be resisted as *obscurum per obscurius*”—that is, they explain the obscure by the more obscure (1986: 132). Of course, theists have responses to this and related challenges, but such responses involve doing extensive metaphysical analysis and typically depend on adopting one among many competing conceptions of God (see Goetz and Taliaferro 2008: 97–116).

A major contemporary defense of theism that requires the least metaphysical commitments is that of Richard Swinburne. Swinburne avoids the purported problems confronting God’s existence being self-explanatory by claiming God is the ultimate brute fact, and thus has no explanation (2004: 96). Instead, Swinburne treats God like a scientific hypothesis, arguing that we should accept God’s existence because it provides the simplest explanation of the universe and human religious experience (2004: 23–72). In response, some critics reject his claim that it is simpler to accept God as the ultimate brute fact than the universe itself, arguing that God is too different from the world of everyday life and science to meaningfully make such a comparison. Others question whether simplicity is the kind of ultimate epistemic criterion Swinburne claims. (For example, Keith Parsons (2007: 114–17) raises both kinds of criticism.)

Most theistic religious believers are not philosophers, and even philosophers have trouble sorting through these questions regarding whether God provides an adequate ultimate explanation of the universe. To avoid basing the rationality of theistic belief on one’s metaphysical acuity, appeals have been made to a direct knowledge of God via religious experience, intuition, or some built-in fundamental belief-forming mechanism that confers rationality on belief in God. (See “Evidence” in this volume for a discussion of these). Even with these approaches, if it is often held that for belief in God to be rational, one still must rebut those arguments purporting to show that the concept of God in question is logically incoherent, which in turn requires selecting among competing conceptions of God. I cannot do justice to the arguments for and against these alternatives here. Instead, in the last section of this chapter, I will present a new alternative route to one of the most important core commitments of theism. A major advantage of my alternative is that it entirely avoids having to decide on a conception of God and then having to address the metaphysical issues surrounding the explanatory coherence and adequacy of that conception.

Naturalism

Modern Western naturalism has been mostly motivated by two factors: (i) a rejection of theistic explanations (often because of the problems mentioned above) accompanied

by the rejection of “supernatural” entities postulated by most religious traditions; and (ii) the success of the physical sciences. The legacy of the scientific revolution was to take mind out of a scientific account of nature and to eliminate teleological explanations—that is, explanations based on the appeal to some end or value to be realized. Modern day naturalism, therefore, can be reasonably defined as that class of positions that attempt to understand all reality using impersonal and value-less categories and concepts, especially the categories and concepts found in the physical sciences. Not all modern day naturalists think that ideal can be fully met, though virtually all are committed to closely approximating it. However, insofar as the irreducibility and ineliminability of personhood, consciousness, and value are acknowledged, they are given a secondary role: for example, consciousness might be considered as supervening on a reality that can be described in purely impersonal categories and concepts, without any independent causal role. Further, although some naturalists do accept objective moral values, almost all naturalists claim they merely exist as abstract truths that have no impact on the structure of non-abstract reality; hence, the world is morally indifferent to our existence, though by accident some moral goods might be realized, such as that involving our existence as conscious agents. (One possible exception to this is Nicholas Rescher 2000: 169.)

Motivations and Challenges

As mentioned above, one major motivation for naturalism is the rejection of any theistic explanation of the universe (or, more generally, any explanation of the universe in terms of some unbounded, transcendent source). Another is modern science. Science could be divided into three aspects: its methodology, its findings, and the mindset it inculcates. I will address motivations arising for naturalism from the latter here, saving the first two for the third section.

One part of the mindset inculcated by science is the conviction that the order of events in the world has its own integrity. This strongly inclines those with a scientific mindset to reject the idea of a God that intervenes in the natural order. Although one could question why the idea of God’s intervening should be thought of as a problem, an even better response is to note that if God is the sustainer of the world, then it does not make sense to think of God as intervening in any ordinary sense. For, the ordinary idea of intervention involves the idea that the activity of an agent changes the way the world *would operate on its own*, but without God’s sustaining activity, there is no way the world “would have operated” since it would not exist at all.

Scientific training also often inculcates a mindset that rejects mystery or anything that transcends scientific categories, though, as documented by Ken Wilber (1984), many of the leading physicists of the twentieth century—such as Edwin Schrödinger and Albert Einstein—did embrace the idea of the ultimate mysteriousness of reality. In fact, a popular narrative regarding science—one that is particularly evident in the popular science periodical *Scientific American*—is that science has progressively explained phenomena that were once considered inherently mysterious or of supernatural origin. For instance, chemist and popular science writer Peter Atkins claims that “science has never encountered a barrier that it has not surmounted or that it cannot be reasonably expected to surmount eventually” (1987: 13). This leads to the idea that everything can be understood within the impersonal, value-less conceptual framework of science. Thus, the fashion in much of philosophy in the last thirty years is to provide

“naturalistic accounts” of core issues in philosophy—one hears of attempts to naturalize epistemology, ethics, philosophy of mind, and so forth. When such accounts are not forthcoming, some simply deny the existence of those facts that do not seem reducible to purely impersonal, value-free categories, no matter how obvious those facts might appear: for example, some so-called eliminativists in the philosophy of mind deny the existence of consciousness or beliefs, claiming that the corresponding concepts fail to have any referent.

There are serious, if not fatal, problems with the above exaggerated claims regarding the explanatory power of science. First, although science’s past success provides some reason to believe that science will explain currently inexplicable phenomena within the purview of its methodology, it provides no reason to think that science will explain those aspects of the world that theism purports to explain. For example, in principle it is unable to explain the existence and structure of the universe (defined such as to include all physical reality). The reason is that by their very nature, scientific explanations always invoke physical hypotheses—such as laws and initial conditions—even if those hypotheses involve postulating a larger physical reality than the observable universe. Failure to recognize this point has led to such nonsense as the claim made by Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow that “[b]ecause there is a law like gravity, the universe can and will create itself from nothing in the manner described in Chapter 6” (2010: 180).

Second, after over forty years of philosophical work, there are few successes in providing naturalistic understandings of core aspects of persons—such as consciousness, experience, and intentionality. As John Searle, himself a naturalist, notes:

Acceptance of the current [materialist] views [of the mind] is motivated not so much by an independent conviction of their truth as by a terror of what are apparently the only alternatives . . . [namely] an “anti-scientific” approach, as represented by Cartesianism or some other traditional religious conception of the mind.

(1992: 3–4)

The track record in the area of philosophy of mind so far has been one of failure, with many naturalists, such as Colin McGinn (for example, in 1999: 54–62), claiming that in principle a scientific account of consciousness cannot be given even though it is a natural phenomenon. As Nagel (2001) has extensively argued, similar serious problems confront any naturalistic account of ethical or epistemic norms—such as accounts of the distinction between good and bad reasoning. Since naturalists’ assertions of the epistemic superiority of naturalism to theism will require making normative claims, naturalism is in serious trouble if it cannot at least account for epistemic normativity.

Third, even restricting themselves to providing an account of the physical world, naturalists have a severe problem with completely excluding an implicit appeal to consciousness or personal agency. The problem has to do with the fundamental properties invoked by physics. Concepts can be divided into those that are primitive and those that are constructed. A constructed concept is a concept defined in terms of other concepts—for example, “being a circle” is defined as “the set of points equidistant from a single point on a plane.” A constructed concept only has meaning insofar as one can give meaning to the concepts out of which it is constructed. Clearly, almost all concepts used in physics are constructed—the concept of an electric charge

is not part of our ordinary conceptual repertoire, but must be defined in terms of other concepts. In fact, the only non-constructed concepts are those that are either abstracted from experience or are in some sense innate (with innate including those triggered by experience as long as they are not solely abstracted from experience). Although some purely physical concepts arguably are innate—such as that of being a point in space or that of causation—the set of such concepts is too thin to form a purely naturalistic metaphysics. For example, to define something in terms of its causal, spatial, or mathematical relations with other things will provide an ultimately content-full metaphysics only if some further primitive concept underlies our concept of these other things. As for adding to the above repertoire of primitive concepts by appealing to further concepts abstracted from experience, these seem to make direct or indirect reference to the mental—for example, as a first approximation one might define the concept of “being red” in terms of something’s having the power to form red images under standard lighting conditions.

In contrast, arguably mental concepts are directly grounded in experience: for example, it is plausible to hold that we directly experience our own consciousness and its contents, along with our own selves as agents acting in the world. If this analysis is correct, any adequate metaphysics must include consciousness and the personal as ultimate categories, thus rendering a purely naturalistic metaphysics unintelligible. The question is then not theism versus naturalism, but theism versus some non-theistic contender that takes the personal as one of the ultimate categories for understanding the world. In any case, the naturalist faces a major conceptual challenge of providing a concept of the physical world that has sufficient content; this could be thought of as the counterpart to the common naturalist’s claim discussed above that theism is vacuous. Although much of Western philosophy since the seventeenth century has consisted of addressing this problem (for example, the work of David Hume and Immanuel Kant), modern day naturalists typically just ignore it, forgetting the deeply problematic character of developing a concept of the external world without implicitly appealing to consciousness. Perhaps they assume that somehow science has resolved this problem, but a careful look at fundamental physics reveals that physicists never address what things are in themselves. Rather, they write down equations describing various mathematical relations between things; eventually, however, to be meaningful these relations must be grounded in things or states for which we have a positive concept, which just brings us back to the same problem.

Finally, as stressed by Nagel, Western versions of naturalism encounter a severe skeptical worry because of their commitment to our minds being the result of unguided chance and natural selection (2001: 127–41). The problem is that natural selection would only lead us to expect reason to be reliable insofar as it helped our pre-historic ancestors reproduce. Yet, arguments for naturalism are based on assuming the reliability of philosophical lines of reasoning, particularly those philosophical intuitions regarding the plausibility of various metaphysical and epistemological theses. Yet in the long course of the evolution of our brains, specifically philosophical intuitions would have been irrelevant to survival, consequently undermining any confidence in their reliability. So naturalism threatens to undermine its own support. Finally, even though many naturalists recognize the above problems, they nonetheless typically reject theism as an explanation, often citing the explanatory problems for theism raised in the first section of this chapter; instead, they opt for some other way out. What I propose next largely, if not entirely, avoids this type of objection.

A Middle Way

To explicate my new proposal, I begin by noting that the main reason people care about whether God exists is that God's existence implies that the world and our lives are providentially ordered. Contrary to what is commonly held, the essence of providence does not merely consist of the universe or our lives being the result of an agent's intentions. Suppose, for instance, that one held that God is morally indifferent and created us for some unknown purpose—perhaps just to watch us live, suffer, and die. This belief would not give life meaning, nor would it ground any expectations about the structure of the world or our future lives; it could not even ground a trust in some purported case of special revelation. Rather, the core of a meaningful idea of providence is that the universe is non-accidentally structured to positively, if not optimally, realize moral goodness. Theism provides one account of how this ordering comes about: namely, an all good God would create a reality with a positive, if not optimal, balance of good over evil; or, given that God could not predict how exactly reality would unfold—because of the choices of free creatures, for instance—God would create a reality structured in such a way that it is likely that a positive balance of good over evil would be realized.

The idea that non-abstract reality is structured so that moral (and aesthetic) value is positively, or optimally, realized is what has become known as the *axiarchic thesis*, though usually advocates of this view—such as John Leslie (1979) and Hugh Rice (2000)—add the additional claim that it is structured in this way because of some kind of metaphysical necessity (or at least consider it to explain the existence and structure of the world). I define axiarchism in a more minimalist way, not making any additional metaphysical or explanatory claims except that this belief plays an epistemically normative role as an ideal of natural order (INO), a concept that I explain below.

Although theists are committed to the axiarchic thesis (and thus are what I will call “axiarchists”), one might wonder whether axiarchism itself captures all the reasons why the truth of theism deeply matters to people. The only reason an additional postulate of a Divine Reality would matter is that it potentially allows for the possibility of the realization of certain goods in our lives that would not otherwise be possible. For example, one might claim that there is some potentially great good in a personal or mystical relation with Divine Reality. If such additional goods could only be realized by a Divine Reality, and such a Divine Reality is logically possible, then a sufficiently robust version of the axiarchic thesis—for example, one that said reality optimally realizes value—would entail such a Divine Reality. So, arguably, a sufficiently robust version of the axiarchic thesis captures why the truth of theism deeply matters to people.

Finally, since the goodness of God is the only attribute that leads to any expectation about the structure of non-divine reality, it is only via entailing axiarchism that theism informs any expectations about the structure of the universe or the destiny of human beings. That said, belief in the axiarchic thesis itself does not require a commitment to God as an ultimate explanation of non-divine reality, and hence does not run into the problems elaborated in the first section of this chapter.

In the next several subsections, I argue for the superiority of the axiarchic thesis versus its naturalistic contender based on an examination of the methodology and findings of science. As I will argue, instead of being the strongest support for naturalism, science offers one of the strongest reasons for rejecting naturalism in favor of axiarchism. I begin with an explication of the deep commitment to the structure of reality implicit in scientific methodology itself.

Scientific Methodology

To begin, consider what has become known as the *underdetermination of theory by data problem*. This is the problem that for any set of extant observational data, there are indefinitely many logically consistent hypotheses that can account for the data but which have different predictive consequences in untested domains. Consequently, in order for scientists to choose one theory over another—even merely for its potential predictive success in unobserved domains or new applications—they must go beyond mere logical consistency and fit with data. Rather, they must rely on what are called *theoretical virtues*. The most commonly cited theoretical virtue is that of simplicity, a virtue that says that everything else being equal, we should prefer simple theories over complex ones. Using this virtue commits one to some claim in the neighborhood of the idea that the relevant aspects of the world (such as the fundamental laws of nature) are more likely to be simple than complex.

The need for invoking simplicity is nicely illustrated by the case of “curve fitting” in which scientists attempt to find the right equation that both accounts for a body of data and can serve as a trustworthy basis for future predictions or extrapolations. For example, suppose that one collects data on the relation between the magnitude of force exerted on a mass and the magnitude of the mass’s acceleration. The data will consist of measurements of accelerations that result from various forces. Graphically, this could be represented by a plot of data points (including error bars), with the amount of force on the y-axis and the amount of acceleration on the x-axis (see [Figure 14.1](#)). It is a mathematical fact that for any number of data points, there always exist infinitely many functions that will perfectly go through the data points, but radically disagree about the values of the force associated with unobserved values of acceleration. Consequently, to choose the appropriate function to use for predictions, scientists must consider something more than fit with data. Typically, scientists consider the simplicity, naturalness, elegance, or some other purported feature of an equation—such as how well it fits with background information (such as previous theories or similar cases). Indeed, the

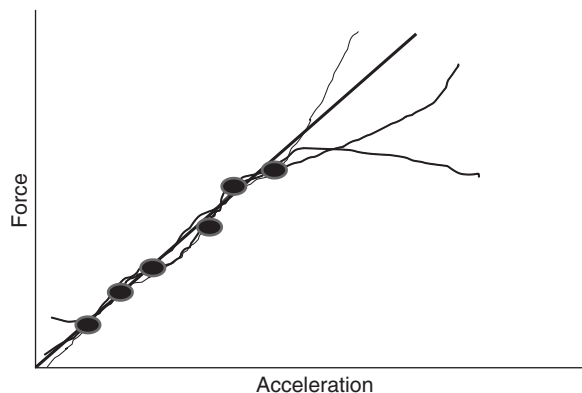


Figure 14.1 The underdetermination problem is that for any set of observational data, indefinitely many theories (e.g., curves) can account for the data. In extrapolating from the data points using the solid, straight line instead of the other possible curves, scientists are implicitly assuming the world is in some sense more likely to be simple than complex.

equation they ultimately choose might even miss one or more of the points by a greater amount than experimental error.

In the terminology I introduced earlier, the use of a theoretical virtue implicitly commits one to claiming that some corresponding property is what I call an *INO*. Roughly, I define some overarching property to be an *INO* for a person if and only if: (i) methodologically the person is explicitly or implicitly committed to treating the world as being, or as likely to be, structured in such a way that there is a positive realization of that property; and (ii) that commitment guides their inductive practices and choice of theories. For example, the use of simplicity in scientific theory choice implicitly commits one to something in the neighborhood of the claim that the world is more likely to be simple than complex (at least in its basic law structure). Thus, insofar as scientists use simplicity this way, they are committed to simplicity as an *INO*. Finally, I define a *primitive* *INO* (a *PINO*) as an *INO* that is not based on a commitment to some other *INO*—for example, if simplicity is an *INO* for one because one holds that the world is structured to optimize elegance, then simplicity would not be a *PINO*.

As shown by the curve-fitting example, *INOs* form the basis of our inductive practices—such as being able to extrapolate from observed data and to choose the best explanation of some set of phenomena. This means that one's *PINOs* cannot be justified in a non-circular way by their past success, since any argument from their past success to their future reliability would be an argument from observed data (namely, their past success) to unobserved data (namely, their future success), and thus would itself require assuming one's *PINOs*. Nonetheless, it seems possible for their past success to increase one's confidence in them, and thus in some way confirm them; and likewise for their past failure to undermine them.

Axiarchism, Naturalism, and Scientific Methodology

In general, naturalists and axiarchists share the same *INOs*, with some qualifications to be discussed below. Where they differ is in their *PINOs*. Consider simplicity. Both axiarchists and naturalists would accept simplicity as an *INO*. Naturalists would likely take some appropriately qualified version of this *INO* as primitive—such as claiming that it is a brute fact that the universe is structured in a simple way, and it is a brute fact that simplicity should be an epistemic norm to decide between scientific theories. In contrast, axiarchists claim that reality is ordered for the positive realization of moral (and aesthetic) value—that is, the axiarchic thesis itself is their *PINO*; or, put succinctly, axiarchists see goodness as a *PINO*.

If the axiarchic thesis is to make sense of the use of simplicity and other theoretical virtues in scientific methodology, axiarchists must at least show that axiarchism renders the use of such virtues unsurprising. One such explanation is that simplicity contributes to elegance, at least for the classical notion of elegance as simplicity with variety, famously stated in the eighteenth century by William Hogarth (1753). Thus, for this reason alone, axiarchism renders it unsurprising that an elegant universe has a high degree of complexity while having a highly simple underlying law structure.

Axiarchists could also argue, first, that there are certain moral goods that can be more fully realized in a world structured to be conducive to the development of scientific technology and discoverability. For instance, technology (which depends on discoverability) allows for the embodied conscious agents (*ECAs*) that arise in the universe to influence each other for good or for ill on a much larger scale, thereby greatly increasing

the range and extent of potential virtuous responses and positive connections between these agents. In addition, one might think scientific discovery is important in and of itself. They could then go on to argue, as I will below, that the universe's manifesting the right kind of simplicity greatly aids in its discoverability. Thus, given that we can glimpse some good coming from a universe that gives rise to ECAs that can discover it, axiarchism renders it unsurprising that the universe will be discoverable.

Although the axiarchic thesis constitutes an enormous assumption about the structure of reality beyond what we can observe or deduce by the accepted rules of logic, any PINO of the naturalist will also. Thus, even if axiarchists can offer no further justification for their thesis (such as via an argument for theism), that would not make them worse off than naturalists who must posit their PINO without further justification.

One could also put the point as follows. If value is defined more generally as any property that comes in degrees and plays a normative role, then to engage in scientific enquiry one must be committed to some property, p , being a PINO. A plausible *a priori* constraint on this property is that it be a fundamental property, not constructed from other properties. Axiarchists hold that this property involves moral value; naturalists deny this, opting for some non-moral value—typically simplicity, or, somewhat reluctantly, elegance. Who is right? A sensible way to begin to answer this question is to look more carefully at scientific methodology and the structure of the universe. I begin by more carefully looking at how simplicity is used in scientific theory choice.

Qualified Simplicity

The kind of simplicity that has been successful in science, and is now implicitly considered normative, is simplicity in the *humanly practical limit*, not absolute simplicity or elegance. To illustrate, consider Newton's equation of gravity: $F = Gm_1m_2/r^2$. This equation is very simple when written in the Newtonian mathematical framework (namely, one based on Euclidean geometry with its three spatial dimensions and one independent time dimension). Similarly, Einstein's equation of gravity has great simplicity when expressed in the mathematical framework of general relativity (namely, a 4-dimensional semi-Riemannian manifold). Yet, if written in the Newtonian conceptual framework, Einstein's equation is equivalent to Newton's law $F = Gm_1m_2/r^2$, plus infinitely many small correction terms. These correction terms only become important for large gravitational fields or relativistic velocities. Consequently, within the Newtonian framework the experimentally correct equation of gravity is actually enormously complex—its simplicity lies in its humanly practical limit. Furthermore, the fact that it has such a simple limiting form for *practical purposes* depends on specific contingent facts about our existence—for example, that our planet is not orbiting close to a black hole.

Similar things could be said about the relation of quantum mechanics to classical mechanics: if the predictions of quantum mechanics (in terms of expectation values) are written out in the classical mathematical framework with real numbers denoting quantities, one obtains simple equations (corresponding to the equations of classical mechanics), with infinitely many correction terms that are very small except when quantum effects become important. This simplicity in the humanly practical limit—which I henceforth call *qualified simplicity*—has allowed us to discover the classical equations while at the same time providing the experimental basis for moving to the quantum framework.

To make sense of the success and continued use of this qualified simplicity, one can-

not merely assume that the underlying law structure of the world is likely to be simple or elegant. Neither of these would give us any grounds for thinking that the equations of physics would be simple in the humanly accessible limits within ultimately unsatisfactory mathematical frameworks (such as the Newtonian framework), but not simple outside those practically useable limits. Being structured for discoverability, however, does make sense of it. Given our limited cognitive capacities, we would expect a discoverable world to be one structured so that qualified simplicity is a useful guide. Thus we would expect a universe that is optimally discoverable to be such that (i) at each conceptual framework (such as the flat space-time of Newtonian mechanics), simplicity would offer a generally good guide; but (ii) it would fail at the boundaries, thereby forcing the ECAs in that universe to go to the next theoretical rung (such as to the curved space-time of Einstein) in their scientific quest.

The naturalist could respond that it is a lucky brute fact that the universe has exhibited this anthropocentric form of simplicity. This response, however, misses an important point: scientists continue to be confident in this form of simplicity. If the success of qualified simplicity (or any other type of simplicity) is merely considered an accidental regularity—something that just happens by chance—there are no grounds for expecting it to continue. Yet, scientists do expect qualified simplicity to continue to be a guide to predictively accurate theories. Qualified simplicity is what separates out the equations actually used from those competitors that are logically consistent and fit the data, as in the curve-fitting example. (It is not absolute simplicity since most physicists think that current physics is a low-energy approximation to some higher-level set of theories, most likely formulated in a mathematical framework as different from the current one as the framework of general relativity is from Newtonian mechanics.) Thus, one must not only assume that the world just happens to have been structured for the success of qualified simplicity, but that it is *non-accidentally* structured in this way, whatever further account one gives of this idea of being non-accidental. Because qualified simplicity makes essential reference to *the ECA-assessable limit*, relying on it appears to involve an implicit teleological commitment to the universe being structured for discoverability, which is at best difficult to reconcile with naturalism. Further, this assumption of discoverability is not isolated to the use of simplicity: as documented by Mark Steiner (1998), it was pervasive in the development of twentieth-century physics.

Naturalism, Theism, and the Structure of the World

Next, consider the structure of the world. Two salient facts stand out: the basic structure of the universe is extraordinarily fine-tuned so that ECA can arise in it, and the world contains a lot of evil. For example, with regard to the former, the cosmological constant (or equivalently, the dark energy density of the universe) which is commonly estimated to require a fine-tuning of one part in 10^{120} (that is, 1 followed by 120 zeros) in order for ECA to arise. (For the evidence for fine-tuning, see Collins 2003, 2009a: 211–26, forthcoming a and Rees 2000.)

Elsewhere I use a variation of the *likelihood principle* of confirmation theory to argue that fine-tuning strongly confirms theism. My argument is that given the extreme fine-tuning necessary for a universe to be structured so that ECA could arise, the existence of an ECA-structured universe is very surprising (that is, epistemically improbable) under the hypothesis that naturalism is true and that there is only one universe—what I called the naturalistic single-universe hypothesis. Further, I argued that the existence of such

a universe is not surprising under theism/axiarchism. Consequently, an ECA-structured universe is less surprising under theism/axiarchism than under the naturalistic single-universe hypothesis; its existence confirms the former hypothesis over the latter.

To support the claim that the existence of such a universe is not surprising under theism/axiarchism, I argue that, despite the seemingly enormous difficulty presented by the problem of evil, we can nonetheless glimpse how the existence of an ECA-structured universe could make an overall positive contribution to the moral value of reality. I suggest that the vulnerability that comes from embodiment allows for a particular kind of value—that arising from the ability to engage in particular kinds of virtuous actions—such as self-sacrificial love, courage, and the like. In a theodicy I have developed elsewhere (Collins, forthcoming c), I claim that these virtuous actions can form the basis for eternal, intrinsically valuable connections of appreciation, contribution, and intimacy between conscious agents. For example, if someone significantly helps me in times of suffering, it can create a connection of appreciation in me that has the potential of lasting all eternity, and hence growing in value.

The existence of a universe with agents who are highly vulnerable to their environment and to one another will almost inevitably contain the kind of evils we find in our universe (see Collins 2009a: 255–6). Consequently, insofar as we can glimpse some overall positive moral value realized by such a universe—such as those just cited—the combination of the existence of such a universe with its consequent evils is rendered unsurprising under theism/axiarchism. Under naturalism, however, it is still very surprising that such a universe exists, and hence theism/axiarchism is strongly confirmed over single-universe naturalism even when the existence of evil is taken into account. I have also argued that since the naturalistic multiverse hypothesis does not take away the seeming improbability associated with fine-tuning, theism/axiarchism is also strongly confirmed over it (see Collins 2009a: 262–72; forthcoming b). Consequently, the structure of the universe strongly confirms theism/axiarchism over its naturalistic contender.

Conclusion

As I have defined it, axiarchism is a thesis at the same ontological level as the naturalist's PINO; it is not a thesis that purports to offer a transcendent explanation of the order of the world. Thus, it entirely avoids the common objection to theism discussed in the first section of the chapter, namely that theism explains what is puzzling about the world by hypothesizing a reality that is even more puzzling. Further, it provides much of what theists ultimately care about without requiring that one defend a particular conception of God. This does not mean that one should not go on to consider whether the existence and order of the world need to be explained by some deeper reality that could be appropriately called “God,” or whether such a reality is implied by the axiarchic thesis. Nonetheless, by avoiding the difficult explanatory issues discussed in the first section, I believe that axiarchism provides a potentially powerful new approach to the theism/naturalism debate, one that gains its most significant support from what are often thought to be naturalism's strongest weapons—the methodology and findings of science itself.

Related Topics

Chapter 1: Western Philosophy; Chapter 4: Christianity; Chapter 16: Natural Sciences; Chapter 17: Evolution; Chapter 18: Physical Cosmology.

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15

HUMANITIES

Michael Beaty

This chapter explores the relation between theism and the humanities. First, I remind the reader of the long alliance between the humanities and theism, outlining the interplay of theism and the humanities in the West, beginning with Greek and Roman cultures. Then this chapter reviews the much remarked upon “Crisis in the Humanities.” I suggest that there are no good reasons not to recover the older alliance, and I argue that theism and some versions of secular humanism are rightly allies in defense of the humanities.

Defining the Humanities

The aim of this section is to identify some of the varied ways that the humanities are understood and defined in American higher education and also to display some of the difficulties in defining the humanities. An overview of these difficulties might shed some light on why some people believe strongly in “the humanities” and others find it hard to understand why they matter, especially as academic disciplines or, more to the point, why they have been thought to be so central to the primary tasks of the university.

In many academic institutions, the college of arts and sciences is divided into the natural sciences, the social sciences, the humanities and the fine arts (and some include the fine arts within the humanities). Often, the humanities include departments such as Art History, Classics, English, History, Modern Foreign Languages, Philosophy, and Religion. For a broader extensional definition of the humanities, consider *The National Endowment for the Humanities* website. It says that

[t]he term “humanities” includes, but is not limited to, the study of the following: language, both modern and classical; linguistics; literature; history; jurisprudence; philosophy; archaeology; comparative religion; ethics; the history, criticism and theory of the arts; those aspects of social sciences which have humanistic content and employ humanistic methods; and the study and application of the humanities to the human environment with particular attention to reflecting our diverse heritage, traditions, and history and to the relevance of the humanities to the current conditions of national life.

(www.neh.gov/whoweare/overview.html)

But what have we learned from this long list of subjects that might be identified as disciplines in the humanities? If one wanted to explain to a first-year college student

and her parents what the humanities are and why they are important, what would a philosophy teacher say? Like Socrates, we may ask, "What do these disciplines share in common?" or, following Wittgenstein, "what constitutes their family resemblances?"

An investigation of the meaning of the term "humanities" will produce a near bewildering array of definitions. Here is but a small sample of them. According to one source, the humanities are "those branches of learning that investigate human constructs and concerns, as opposed to natural processes" and have as their ultimate goal, "the exploration and explanation of human experience" (National Endowment of the Humanities website). In a similar vein, another source defines the humanities as "those academic disciplines that study the expressions of human beings [as they] explore and reveal what it means to be human." A textbook entitled *The Humanities in Western Culture* identifies the humanities as those "arts that teach us . . . the significance of life" (Lamm and Cross 1993: 1). By "arts" the authors mean "practices" and the focus of this definition are the human artifacts that are produced as human beings aspire, create, and suffer. So, these efforts at defining the humanities suggest three different but related ways of thinking about them: they seek to explore and explain (1) human experience; (2) human nature; and (3) the arts or practices that attempt to express the meaning or significance of human life. This array of definitions suggests an initial problem. Are scholars in the humanities able to provide an illuminating characterization or definition of this category of human practices and academic study?

Notwithstanding this small worry, let us generalize, charitably, and say that, on the one hand, "the humanities" refers to those practices, modes of creativity, and types of human experience in which human beings express the significance or meaning of human life. On the other hand, "the humanities" refer to those academic disciplines, primarily housed in America's colleges and universities, which study "the humanities" in the first sense. A report on *The Humanities in American Life*, authored by the Commission on the Humanities, seems to have both these senses of "the humanities" in mind when the authors propose that

the humanities mirror our own image and our image of the world. Through the humanities we reflect on the fundamental question: what does it mean to be human? The humanities offer clues but never a complete answer. They reveal how people have tried to make moral, spiritual, and intellectual sense of a world in which irrationality, despair, loneliness, and death are as conspicuous as birth, friendship, hope, and reason. We learn how individuals or societies define the moral life and try to attain it, attempt to reconcile freedom and the responsibilities of citizenship, and express themselves artistically. The humanities do not necessarily mean humaneness, nor do they always inspire the individual with what Cicero called "incentives to noble action." But by awakening a sense of what it might be like to be someone else or to live in another time or culture, they tell us about ourselves, stretch our imagination, and enrich our experience. They increase our distinctively human potential.

(Commission on the Humanities in American Life 1980: 1)

Clearly, the definition or characterization offered by the Commission on the Humanities in American Life, and cited above, places most of its emphasis on the humanities as a subject matter to be studied in America's colleges and universities. In *The Humanities in American Life*, the authors exhort their fellow Americans to recommit themselves to

the humanities, those academic disciplines that reflect on human nature and the human condition—especially on those unique and enduring aspirations, creative achievements, and significant failures of human beings across time. In this latter use of “the humanities,” we assume that the traditional demarcation between the humanities and the natural and social sciences captures important distinctions, some of which have to do with the proper subject matter and some with the methods of inquiry, investigation, and confirmation that are utilized to justify the claims within their different domains. Let us now consider the relation of the humanities to theism, both in the larger culture and with special attention to higher education in the United States.

A Definition of Theism

By theism, I mean, roughly, the view that there is one and only one God, who is creator and sustainer of the universe, who is the only proper object of human worship and obedience, who is perfectly morally good, and all-knowing and all-powerful, who is free, who exists necessarily, who is something like a person, though without a body, hence is a personal being, rather than impersonal (Swinburne 1993: 1; Layman 2007: 12).

The Historical Relationship between Theism and the Humanities in the University

The aim of this section is to trace the development of the humanities in the West. I shall sketch below three important points. First, what we now call the humanities grew out of the liberal arts, the origins of which are in educational practices in Greece and Rome. Second, I remind the reader that these practices were adopted, modified, and nurtured by the Christian Church and learned Christian educators for over two millennia. Some have argued that the early Madrasah schools of Islamic theists had a significant impact on the formation of Western European universities (Ruegg 1992). Third, for most of the history of Western Higher Education, including the brief history of the United States, theism and the humanities were strongly linked.

Arguably, the study of the humanities in the West, and especially in American colleges and universities, can be traced to ancient Greece and, more especially, to republican Rome, where a broad-based education for free citizens was developed and prized. It was based on the study of the *trivium* (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) and the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music). Together, these seven disciplines were called the *liberal* arts because they constituted the sort of education appropriate for a free (Lat. *liber*) human being as opposed to slaves, and those for whom success in crafts, commerce, farming, the trades, and the like, require *techne*.

For republican Rome, two reasons seem foundational for explaining or justifying a liberal arts education. First, they are the educational practices that educate or cultivate one’s humanity. Second, the liberal arts cultivate or form one’s capacities to perform well in the role of citizen in the Roman republic (Cicero, *de Republica* I, 17; Calvin College Curriculum Study Committee 1970: 2; Nussbaum 1997: 8–10). Grammar and rhetoric were especially important for being educated for leadership in civic life. Included in the classical understanding of the liberal arts was not only intellectual formation, but moral formation as well. As the modern notion of the humanities developed in the twentieth century, we see its defenders endorsing and promoting this very same self-understanding: the education of one’s humanity promotes both intellectual and moral formation,

thus making students morally better persons and citizens. This aim was central to the justification and validation of the study of the humanities (or more broadly, a liberal arts education).

Very early in the history of the Christian Church, little emphasis was placed on education beyond what was given to the catechumen. No doubt, this neglect is explained by the church's persecuted and minority status, by most Christians having little or no access to public roles or offices in the Roman empire, and by some worries about the "pagan" stories of Greece and Rome and their possible corrupting influences on the moral and intellectual development of one's humanity. An interest in education beyond what the catechumen received emerged when the church received a legally protected status from the Roman authorities. Not surprisingly, some Christians worried about an alliance with pagan learning. Indeed, Tertullian's famous question, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" suggests that Christianity is inimical to pagan learning (Tertullian 1951). However, other learned Christians, among them St Basil, Gregory Nazianzen, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Justin Martyr, urged the appropriation of liberal arts learning—the educational riches of Greece and Rome (Calvin College Curriculum Committee 1970: 3–7). Certainly by the era of Augustine, Christians had begun to take advantage of a liberal arts education much like that of their non-Christian contemporaries (Narum 1960).

Like other theistic religions such as Judaism and Islam, Christianity places an enormous emphasis on particular sacred texts. Christian leaders soon realized that these texts would be best understood through the preparation made available by liberal education (Sullivan 2009). Augustine was especially insistent on this point (Augustine 1956). Indeed, it is Augustine who argued that, just as the people of Israel appropriated the gold and silver of the Egyptians as they left Egypt for their own uses, so the liberal learning of the Greeks and Romans should be appropriated for its usefulness to Christian education, for reading and understanding the Scriptures, and for defending, propagating, and understanding the Christian faith (Augustine 1956: 554). And while Augustine and Clement, for example, disagreed about how narrow or large a range of usefulness liberal learning afforded the Christian, they both endorsed the kind and range of studies we now recognize as part of the domain of the humanities, and they affirmed it as essential to a genuine and complete human, or humane, education—an education in the humanities.

The use of the seven liberal arts would be preserved and passed on, first in the cathedral and monastic schools and then in the medieval university. In the schools, the justification for the study of the liberal arts was its usefulness in training the clergy and those joining the monastic orders. The earliest universities arose in the eleventh century and developed from the cathedral schools and monastic schools. They arose when associations of students and teachers petitioned and received a charter guaranteeing legal rights to this now incorporated public entity, the charter being granted by some official governing authority (Colish 1997: 267; Rashdall 1936).

In these new universities (for example, Bologna, Paris, Oxford, Modena, Cambridge, and many others) that began in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, philosophy was added to the study of the seven liberal arts. Philosophy plus the seven liberal arts now constituted the Faculty of Arts. As some of the earliest universities grew and developed they began to earn reputations for specialization in one of three professional areas of study: Law, Medicine, or Theology. At such universities, to the Faculty of Arts was added a Faculty of Law, Faculty of Medicine, or Faculty of Theology. Students were

required to graduate from the Faculty of Arts before they could matriculate to one of the other professional faculties (Rashdall 1936; Calvin College Curriculum Committee 1970: 7). Thus was established the tradition that the Faculty of Arts (the liberal arts or humanities) provided a general education as a prerequisite for a professional, specialized education; this suggests that an education in the Faculty of Arts (the humanities) is distinct from, prior to, and more fundamental than the professional training.

The Renaissance is associated with a rediscovery of the classical culture of Greece and Rome as well as with the movement called *humanism*. Those who embraced its themes regarded themselves as humanists, returning to Cicero's use of the term *humanitas* to refer to someone whose education prepares them both for citizenship and leadership. Indeed, Renaissance education promoted the idea that the principle aim of the best sort of education for human beings is the development of virtue, or human excellence; and thus education is thought to be both moral and intellectual. The kind of education recommended is, again, one of general studies and consists of grammar, rhetoric, and poetry (the new *trivium*), and includes history (a subject taken seriously for the first time), moral philosophy, and classical languages (Greek and Latin) (Kristeller 1965: 178). If we regard the successful student of the medieval university as skilled in logic and rigorous argumentation, that skill being displayed in written and oral disputations, the successful recipient of a Renaissance humanist education is a skilled rhetorician whose style and eloquence, in speaking and in writing, equally is capable of persuading his fellow citizens to responsible action. The latter is also skilled in poetry and prose, and capable of expressing with delicacy and wit the delights of nature and the joys of human relationship and solidarity (Calvin College Curriculum Report 1970: 9).

There was a time when Renaissance humanism was characterized by standard histories of education as largely non-religious or secular in its primary aims and expressions. Yet this view is largely now discredited, for virtually all those who identified themselves as humanists identified themselves as serious Christians and clearly they were. More importantly, recent scholars note that many of the Renaissance humanists embraced and refined *pietas et doctrina*, the view that a love of learning and love of God cannot be separated in the life of the learned and wise Christian. Indeed, they must be integrated or unified as aspects of a single life (Leclercq 1961; Calvin College Curriculum Study Committee 1970: 10).

The influence of the Renaissance humanists on university education is significant. In the United States, for example, until the mid- to late nineteenth century, the curriculum was grounded in grammar and rhetoric, the study of the classical languages, and the study of classical literary texts. The aim was to produce a learned Christian—a cultured man (or woman) of letters, a good citizen, a person of good character (who possesses the virtues), and who enjoys a highly cultured, and thus, cultivated and elevated private life.

While I am omitting some important nuances by failing to discuss in detail the impact of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation on higher education in the West, it is sufficient for our purposes to focus on higher education in the United States, initially under the heading “The Old-Time Christian College” (Ringenberg 2006). The old-time Christian college had several salient features. Arguably, not only a product of the medieval university and Renaissance humanism, it was also substantially influenced by the Scottish Enlightenment (Sloan 1971). The central purpose of the “old-time” college was to educate the whole person, all one's intellectual, moral, and religious capacities. While such an education was excellent preparation for a career, its primary aims

were to equip the person to exercise their moral, social, political duties, and religious duties correctly, thereby enabling the individual to exercise responsible leadership in the church and in civic life. Because the old-time college was a Christian college, it presumed that human beings were creatures, dependent on God and one another, and on the created order itself. Its intellectual leaders further assumed that our human nature was constituted by a variety of different capacities or powers and that diversity of legitimate educational practices were necessary to develop or cultivate one's human powers. At the same time, they expected that the diversity of educational practices were capable of being unified within an intelligible whole in the university, just as they assumed there to be a variety of human and non-human creaturely goods that are related and unified in an intelligible whole that constitutes the created order.

According to Julie Reuben, the Harvard seal, adopted in the late eighteenth century, nicely symbolized the unity suggested above. At the center was the Latin word for truth, *veritas*, inscribed across three open books and encircled by the motto *Christo et Ecclesiae* (for Christ and the Church). The seal symbolized the unity of all truth, a unity that brought religious truths in the Christian Scriptures, the moral truths in pagan literature, and the truths of science in the book of nature into harmony and unity with one another (Reuben 1996: 1–2). Ideally, at least, the American system of higher education, from the founding of Harvard in 1836 until, perhaps, the founding of Cornell University in 1865 under the aegis of the Morrill Land Grant Act, aimed at organizing all knowledge—of the cosmos, human beings, and society—into an intelligible whole.

The old-time college's curriculum was recognizably classical, requiring of its students courses in the seven traditional liberal arts with an emphasis on grammar and rhetoric and classic literature, in Greek and Latin, and in philosophy. Additionally, it required some instruction in what we would call the natural sciences. Its signature was a year-long course in moral philosophy, attending especially to those virtues and duties that make one fit for society and citizenship. Typically, the college or university president, often an ordained minister, taught the course. It is clear that the old-time college retained its classical, medieval, and Renaissance heritage and aims—the cultivation of a cultured man and a responsible citizen of the new American republic. Indeed, the 1980 report, *The Humanities in American Life*, puts it this way:

Until well into the nineteenth century, the humanities dominated an undergraduate curriculum whose vocational, educational, and social purposes were in harmony. The early American college had three basic aims: to train young men for the clergy or political leadership; to develop the mental discipline and moral and religious habits appropriate to a cultivated gentleman, whatever his vocation; and to maintain, through induction into the traditions of classical culture, a small elite of the educated in a predominantly agricultural society. These goals, educators thought, could be achieved through studies in the literature, history, and culture of Western antiquity, combined with religious instruction. Through the humanities the early college expressed its faith in the coherence of knowledge, in a single cultural tradition, and in the community of the learned.

(Commission on the Humanities in American Life 1980: 63)

Indeed, then, Christian theism and the humanities were a part of a unified picture of the world and the university.

Soon the landscape changed significantly and by the 1970s it had been dramatically altered with the consequence that the humanities had been significantly displaced from its foundational and unifying role in the university. No better summary of the altered landscape is available than the above-mentioned report *Humanities in American Life*.

To begin, the amount and kinds of human knowledge increased in dizzying fashion. No small faculty and single curriculum was adequate to accommodate it. The theoretical and practical sciences were a significant cause of this explosion and science achieved a stature that once was occupied by philosophy and theology but exceeded them in important ways. Because of the theoretical and practical mastery of nature in new and astonishing ways, made possible by a variety of new scientific disciplines, some began to entertain the idea that only scientific knowledge counts as knowledge, thus potentially relegating theism (and religion more generally) and morality to the margins of the university and to the private sphere, in contrast to the public arena of civic engagement and social and political responsibility. In 1862 the Morrill Land Grant Act was enacted by Congress, leading to the establishment of many new state (and a few private, for example, as mentioned above, Cornell University) universities whose primary mandate was to make available the information and skills necessary for success in an array of *techno*-dependent professions. Under the pressure of the aforementioned vocationalism, there was real pressure to view a university education merely instrumentally. Ultimately, this promoted the perception that a university is mainly a means to getting a well-paid job.

The establishment of Johns Hopkins as a German-like research university further complicated the public's understanding of the university. Is the discovery and validation of new knowledge the real essence of the university? If so, why worry about having a common core of liberal arts or humanities subjects that all undergraduate students are required to take? What's the point? For a little over half of the twentieth century, educating for civic responsibility, cultural literacy, and providing students the resources for developing their humanity for the sake of personal fulfillment seemed satisfactory. But, by the 1970s many students, and the colleges themselves, no longer regarded this kind of rationale as persuasive. Teaching civic and moral responsibility is not the place of faculty, whose expertise lies in specialized areas of knowledge. And individual fulfillment was understood as best achieved by students having fewer restrictions, fewer requirements, and more electives—in essence, more individual freedom. Not surprisingly, more and more colleges and universities diminished their core requirements and many replaced them with a set of distribution requirements that could be met in a wide variety of ways. No common core here. The authors sum up their analysis of the fate of the humanities in the twentieth century with these words:

At all kinds of institutions, faculty and administrators withdrew from the business of shaping a coherent philosophy of education. Free to choose, students chose vocationalism. Liberal education and the humanities, their fates still linked, were willed to the periphery of undergraduate learning.

(Commission on the Humanities in American Life 1980: 64)

What happened next is no surprise.

The Crisis in the Humanities

Despite the oft professed (especially by those faculty members who teach in the humanities) centrality of the humanities to the aspirations and ends of a real university, a

frequent refrain these days, and not a new one, is that both in culture and in the university, “the Humanities” are in crisis. This section merely reminds the reader of the symptoms of this well-known crisis.

The authors of *The Humanities in American Life* offer this overview:

This report is intended for all who care about the quality of our common life. Surveying America today, many would argue that the humanities are in crisis and would describe this crisis as symptomatic of a general weakening of our vision and resolve. Although this Commission does not take an apocalyptic view, we are deeply concerned about serious social deficiencies of perception and morale.

(Commission on the Humanities in American Life 1980: 3)

Consider a more recent list of laments about the state of the humanities in the culture and in higher education. In March 1999, Robert Weisbuch, then distinguished professor of English at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and also the president of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation concluded that the “dismal facts” support the view that the state of the humanities is bad and getting worse. According to Weisbuch:

1. the percentage of undergraduates majoring in the humanities has halved in the last three decades;
2. financing for faculty research in the humanities has decreased (while going up in the natural sciences);
3. the salary gap between full-time scholars in the humanities and in other non-humanities disciplines has widened;
4. more and more humanities faculty are adjunct, and part-time faculty, and paid “ridiculously low salaries”;
5. the humanities are far less at the center of higher education than once was the case; and
6. the humanities faculty have lost the respect of their non-humanities colleagues and the attention of the intelligent public.

(Weisbuch 1999)

Most of these same worries were expressed in the report on *The Humanities in American Higher Education*.

Indeed, laments about the “crisis of the humanities” are commonplace. A few recent examples include the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (March 5, 2010), two speeches by the chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Jim Leach, with the same title, though with somewhat different content—“The Looming Crisis of the Humanities” (October 8, 2010 and February 9, 2011), a report in *Inside Higher Education* about Cornell University’s president, David Skorton’s state of the university address, which is a call to arms to defend the humanities (November 1, 2010), and an opinion piece in the *New York Times* by Duke English Professor and culture critic, Stanley Fish called “The Crisis in the Humanities Officially Arrives” (October 11, 2010). Not only do they address the questions about the symptoms and causes of the crisis but these laments address, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly, fundamental questions such as “What are the humanities?,” “What ends do the humanities serve?,” and “Why should

they receive public support?" The latter question is especially pressing for many citizens, given a near worldwide economic recession, and its dire impact on the United States economy. As state and federal politicians deliberate about what programs to cut from state and federal budgets, some worry that politicians will decide that we can no longer afford to invest in the humanities. Indeed, some contend that the humanities "don't pay for themselves."

How do apologists defend the humanities? The effort to defend the humanities can be understood as an effort to respond to what prominent humanist scholar, Louis Menand, has identified as the "crisis of rationale" (Menand 2001). On the NEH website one finds one possible answer to the question "What ends do they help us achieve?"—a response to the crisis of rationale: "They help us achieve a better understanding of the past, a better analysis of the present, and a better view of the future." And with respect to the pressing question, "Why should the humanities receive public support?" we find this familiar idea: The humanities "enhance our understanding of what it means to be an American because democracy, citizenship, and the humanities are inextricably linked."

In 2005, Geoffrey Galt Harpham wrote "Beneath and Beyond the 'Crisis in the Humanities'." There he identifies as the material symptoms or causes of the crisis the familiar declining enrollments, majors, numbers of course offered, and salaries (Harpham 2005: 21). He remarks that the crisis is sometimes linked to:

1. the way in which some traditional disciplines in the humanities are imposing self-inflicted wounds on themselves;
2. a general disarray in liberal education;
3. the moral collapse and intellectual impoverishment of the culture; and
4. a "crisis of rationale".

Harpham's response to the "crisis of rationale" and the bewildering number of definitions of the humanities is to offer the following, self-described "banal" formulation:

If traditional rationales for humanistic study were to be condensed into a single sentence, that sentence might be the following: The scholarly study of documents and artifacts produced by human beings in the past enables us to see the world from different points of view so that we may better understand ourselves.

(Harpham 1980: 23)

Not surprisingly, NEH chairman Jim Leach has responded to the "crisis in rationale." In one address, Leach identifies two worries that are addressed or remedied by the humanities and provide, at least in part, a justification for public support for the humanities. First, he suggests that we should worry if the practices of science are not tethered to the humanities. The antidote is to provide opportunities for "the humanities to address life's enduring questions in tandem or in the wake of scientific advances" thus providing "the contextual and ethical perspectives to scientific inquiry and its consequences" (Leach, October 8: 3).

Second, he contends that the humanities are uniquely and especially well equipped to understand and address deep social problems such as global terrorism. Leach claims that the humanities teach tolerance and respect for diversity and diverse views, just the kind of civility needed for the survival of a civilized society (Leach, October 8: 2).

Admitting that the humanities are facing a crisis in funding and attention, David Skorton, the president of Cornell University, initiated a campaign to rally public, widespread, national support for the humanities. One aspect of his campaign is quite practical—to resist the diminishment of the budgets of The National Endowment for the Humanities and for the National Endowment of the Arts. The other aspect of Skorton's campaign can be understood as an effort to respond to the “crisis in rationale.” Skorton embraces the necessity of articulating a vision for the humanities' comprehensiveness, depth, and rhetorical power so that ordinary citizens and the politicians who determine state and national budgets can grasp both their short-term and long-term significance. What is his case for the importance of the humanities, an importance that should translate into both widespread private and public support, and open the public's coffers? Not surprisingly, given our pluralistic culture, Skorton insists that one very important way in which the humanities are essential to the American way of life is that they help us understand different, diverse cultures, thus, cultivating both understanding and tolerance. Lamenting the nastiness of our recent political debates, Skorton insists that the study of the humanities can promote both civility and reasoned participation in civic, social, and political life. Finally, with a proliferation of scandals in the business world, political life and even academic research, he suggests that the humanities have remedies for these maladies because of their emphasis on both critical and ethical thinking (*Inside Higher Education*, November 1, 2010).

To sum up, what goods do the practices and disciplines that constitute the humanities achieve such that they should receive significant attention, continue to occupy a central role in America's universities and colleges, and receive widespread private and public support? The humanities:

1. help us understand ourselves (as individuals, communities, societies, cultures, nation-states) better, both in the present and with respect to our future prospects, in part, by more fully appreciating the past and present;
2. help us understand our roles as Americans, citizens of a pluralistic, participatory democracy; increase our engagement and participation in that democracy;
3. promote a broader, deeper understanding of the success and dangers of science—this perspective includes bringing to bear on it a wider, deeper ethical and metaphysical point of view;
4. promote respect for diversity and tolerance for difference;
5. cultivate our character so that we become better human beings and citizens.

These familiar defenses of the humanities are not without detractors. Even some advocates for the humanities find these typical explanations and defenses underwhelming. For example, some find claims that the humanities make us more tolerant of diversity, morally better persons, better citizens, and so lead to a better society to be implausible (Perloff 2004: 1; Fish, October 11, 2010: 1). Are our efforts to explain the role of the humanities, to respond to the “rationale crisis,” an appeal to gassy generalizations with little empirical evidence to support them? Is that all there is?

A Theistic Response to the Crisis of the Humanities

In this section, I discuss how an engagement (or re-engagement) with theism might address the current plight of the humanities. I proceed by examining closely several of

Antony Kronman's main theses in his recent trenchant critique of the modern university, *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (2007). I choose Kronman among several recent critiques of the modern university because he offers a clear and compelling account of what the humanities are and why they are legitimate objects of study and worthy of public support (Nussbaum 1997; Sommerville 2006; Lewis 2008). In short, he directly addresses the "crisis of rationale" problem.

Rejecting religious points of view as a ground and framework for the humanities, Kronman defends secular humanism as an overarching framework or worldview by virtue of which the humanities are to be understood and, in light of which, presented to students. In what follows, I argue that he overestimates the difficulties for theism. Because I concede that he gets so much right about what ails the humanities in the modern university, I offer a counter-proposal which seeks common ground among proponents of secular humanism and proponents of, say, theistic or Christian humanism.

Kronman provides a perceptive critique of the modern university, especially in light of a concern for the centrality of the humanities. He notices that the modern university in America has abandoned one of the university's most ancient and primary purposes: providing a "forum for the exploration of life's mystery and meaning through the careful but critical reading of great works of literary and philosophical [and artistic] imagination that we have inherited from the past" (Kronman 2007: 6). More directly, he contends that the purpose of the humanities is to supply students with the resources to grapple with the most fundamental of all questions: What is the meaning of human life, especially one's own life? (Kronman 2007: 9–35). One of the university's most fundamental tasks, then, is to invite students to explore the myriad possible answers to the question, "what makes life worth living?" and invite them to "fashion a life worth living" from their talents, opportunities and aspirations (Kronman 2007: 35).

Provocatively, Kronman suggests that the "crisis in the humanities" ultimately has a deeper explanation. While the rhetoric of many colleges and universities continues to emphasize the centrality and importance of inquiry into the meaning and purpose of human life, and of recognizing that a university education is about more than narrowly professional and vocational concerns, few liberal arts programs provide a place for sustained and structured exploration of humanity's deepest questions (Kronman 2007: 8).

Within the university, whose task is it? Not surprisingly, Kronman assigns the task to the liberal arts in general, but in particular, he contends that it belongs to the humanities because they ought to be the best equipped to accomplish its aims. He says:

Once upon a time, and not long ago, many colleges and university teachers, especially in the humanities, believed they had a responsibility to lead students in an organized examination of this question [what is the meaning of life?] and felt confident in their authority to do so. They recognized that each student's answer must be his or her own but believed that a disciplined survey of the answers the great writers and artists of the past have given to it can be a helpful aid to students in their own personal encounter with the question of what living is for—indeed, an indispensable aid, without which they must face the question not only alone but in disarray.

(Kronman 2007: 35)

Why has the question of life's meaning lost its status as a subject of organized academic instruction and been pushed to the margins of professional respectability in the humanities, where it once occupied a central and honored place? (Kronman 2007: 7). There are two primary causes, he contends. First, "[t]oday, many of those teaching in liberal arts programs, even teachers of the humanities, feel uncomfortable asserting the competence or authority to lead their students in an organized inquiry of this sort" (Kronman 2007: 42). They lack, they think, the professional competence to lead discussions of this sort and don't regard such a task as their responsibility. But this is a function of the idea that the modern university is primarily about research—the discovery of new knowledge. The dominance of this ideal—the tendency in practice to understand the main purpose of the university in this narrow way—undercuts the rationale for the humanities. Thus, the research ideal has the tendency to delegitimize the main project of the humanities. In part, it does so by prioritizing the production of specialized knowledge over general knowledge (the sort essential to the humanities) and defining professional competence in terms of one's specialized knowledge. The idea that helping students grapple with "the meaning of life question," then, is regarded as falling outside one's professional competencies. It becomes tempting, even "natural" to think that it is unprofessional to pretend to have any academic authority or competence to engage in the humanities as Kronman presents them in the perspective of their historical task. So, connection between the research ideal and the professionalization of the academic disciplines disarms scholar/teachers in the humanities from the traditional role the humanities formerly embraced (Kronman 2007: 45, 91–136).

The second problem is the political correctness movement (Kronman 2007: 45, 137–203). Characterizing this movement primarily in terms of diversity, constructivism, and multiculturalism, Kronman argues that an effort to reconstruct the traditional courses in the humanities in light of these "ideals" has illicitly limited the range of possible answers to the meaning of life question, even silenced discussion of some possibilities. He further argues that these ideals are often pursued in ways that are deceptive, even self-deceiving. For example, he accuses those who promote diversity of advocating, in fact, a "sham diversity, whose real goal is moral and spiritual uniformity" (Kronman 2007: 156). More deeply, he argues that the emphasis on political correctness undermines the morally formative ends that are essential to the traditional understanding of the quest for a meaningful life. For it presumes a transcendent framework within which judgments about good and evil, right and wrong, and the nature of a truly flourishing human life are intelligible and the subject of affirmation and reasoned debate. But, he contends, political correctness suggests "values are disguised forms of power," a claim that robs the quest for meaning of its objective significance (Kronman 2007: 135).

To remedy these defects in the modern university, Kronman proposes to give secular humanism a second chance as a philosophy of education in the modern university (Kronman 2007: 74–90). Accordingly he argues that secular humanism is committed to the following claims. First, a pluralism of permanent possibilities of living is compatible with, even presupposes, a common human nature. Second, while a common human nature fixes our needs and places limiting conditions on how these might be met successfully, nonetheless, it follows from the relative openness and plasticity of our common human nature that there is a variety of ways to fulfill these needs. Third, the quest for a meaningful life depends on a structure of value that transcends individual human beings, and human beings must locate themselves within these structures in order to

lead successful lives—lives that respond adequately to their natural quest for a meaningful life (Kronman 2007: 76–82).

A question naturally arises. What makes this framework of thinking about human beings secular? For a theistic way of thinking about human beings is compatible with all three of these points. Only a caricature of theism requires a denial of any of them.

Kronman speaks of secular humanism as a philosophy of education, and I think he means, in part, an intellectual framework that provides intelligibility for the meaning of life's question as one of the principal tasks of the humanities. So far, I don't see a reason to think it has an advantage over a reasonable, intellectually robust, self-confident version of theism, for example, some historically sensitive and articulate version of Christian humanism.

Indeed, I think Kronman's argument depends on a false dilemma: according to him, our alternatives are either secular humanism or religious humanism. But all the various forms of religious humanism are dogmatic forms of indoctrination, so Kronman assumes. So, secular humanism is our only reasonable alternative. But Kronman's rejection of religiously based frameworks for pursuing the meaning of life questions depends on a caricature of theistically grounded and motivated humanistic academic practices. Secular humanism is not the only way forward for those of us who believe both that the meaning of life question should, once again, be made central to the work of the modern university and that it is the proper role of the humanities to initiate and guide such interrogative investigations.

In addition, it seems relatively easy to accommodate his primary objection to theistic (and other religious) perspectives, namely, its dogmatic character. First, note that Kronman identifies secular humanism as a tradition with respect to the effort by arts and letters (the humanities) to initiate students into a temporally long conversation about the meaning of human life (Kronman 2007: 85). Second, let's utilize MacIntyre's definition of a tradition: "when it is in good order it is always partially constituted by an argument about the goods the pursuit of which gives the tradition its . . . purpose . . . And traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict" (MacIntyre 1984: 222). Third, let's adopt MacIntyre's account of "the university as a place of constrained disagreement and imposed participation in [intellectual] conflict, in which a central responsibility of higher education would be to initiate students into [intellectual conflict]" (MacIntyre 1990: 231). In this kind of a university, the humanities faculty member has three tasks: (1) to participate in intellectual conflict as a partisan of a particular point of view, (2) to advance inquiry from within that point of view against internal difficulties known to the participants, and (3) to engage other rival standpoints "doing so both to exhibit what is mistaken in [rival] standpoints in light of one's own point of view and in order to test one's own point of view against the strongest possible objections . . . from one's opponents" (MacIntyre 1990: 231). What one is committed to achieving is a discussion in which each of the rival views is presented as strongly as possible, in which none is illegitimately silenced, and in which students are required to think through the rival positions with rigor, depth, and vitality. On this way of thinking about the interrogation and defense of rival accounts of what makes life meaningful, there is no reason to think secular humanism has any advantage over theistic humanism.

I conclude with a counter-proposal to Kronman. The proponents of secular humanism and of theistic humanism should make common cause in their defense of the humanities with respect to recovering its central role in the university. Kronman underestimates the rich resources that theists have for defending the traditional role of the humanities

in the university. Indeed, an appeal to God as creator and the inference that the physical world is a creation of an all-powerful and all-good Being grounds in intellectually satisfying ways the assumption that the natural world is intelligibly ordered and thus knowable by creatures like us. It assumes a moral order as well and the basis for social and political discussions about the conditions for human flourishing. The doctrine of *imago dei*—that human beings are created in the image of God—is capable of making intelligible the creative aspirations and energies of human beings, as well as providing a metaphysical basis for a shared equality and dignity among them. It is not unreasonable to think that theism is rationally preferable to naturalism, for example. And one wonders what metaphysical view Kronman presupposes for his secular humanism. In short, perhaps he underestimates the ability of theism to make intelligible the humanities and overestimates the ability of his version of secular humanism, in comparison.

More importantly, Kronman also underestimates the potential that different traditions of thought and practice have for arriving at agreement about human nature, what humans count as a flourishing life, what makes life significant, and so on. He presumes that theists could not be equal partners in a rational defense of the humanities. Theists need not be as presumptuous about the proponents of secular humanism.

Related Topics

Chapter 13: Evidence; Chapter 37: Globalization; Chapter 38: Education; Chapter 49: History and Experience; Chapter 54: The Meaning of Life

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Recommended Reading

- Bonner, S. F. (1977) *Education in Ancient Rome*, Berkeley: University of California Press. Provides a helpful overview of the role of education in the Roman society from the third century bc to Trajan.
- Hornblower, S. and A. Spawforth (1996) *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, New York: Oxford University Press. Provides an illuminating account of the Roman private school system at the end of the Roman Republic.
- Newman, J. H. (1982) *The Idea of a University*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press. Provides a classic defense of the idea that the university must be grounded in the liberal arts.
- Nussbaum, M. (2010) *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Defends vigorously the view that the study of the liberal arts, the humanities, is essential for a democracy.
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16

NATURAL SCIENCES

Michael Ruse

By “theism” I understand the belief in a creator God who is willing and able to interfere in the world if deemed necessary. The question I ask in this essay is: What is the relationship between such a belief and the natural sciences? It is probably best to begin with the fourfold division made by physicist-theologian Ian Barbour (1990).

Four Ways of Science and Religion Interacting

Barbour’s first category is that of “conflict.” Here the belief is that science and religion (by “religion” in this essay, I mean “theistic religion”) are at loggerheads. One cannot accept modern science and at the same time profess a belief in religion. Barbour’s second category is that of “independence.” Here the claim is that science and religion talk about entirely different things. Hence, by their very nature they cannot possibly be in conflict, or for that matter be aiding one another. The third category is one of “dialogue.” Here it is accepted that science and religion are different things but nevertheless it is thought that there are areas of contact and perhaps even overlap. Where this occurs, it is possible for science and religion to interact fruitfully. Barbour’s fourth and final category is that of “integration.” Here it is thought that science and religion can come together in one unified, symbiotic whole (see also Ruse 2008).

My suspicion is that few, if any, today, want to deny that there has been and probably always will be conflict between science and religion. The names of Galileo and Darwin come at once to mind. Obviously you cannot accept the modern geological estimation of the Earth’s age at about 4.5 billion years, and at the same time accept the 6,000 years, six-day creation scenario of the so-called “Young Earth Creationists” (Whitcomb and Morris 1961). In the past, some of the most noted supporters of the conflict thesis included Darwin’s great supporter Thomas Henry Huxley (1893) and the Northern Irish physicist John Tyndall (1892). Today, conflict enthusiasts are most notably represented by the “new atheists”: these include the biologist-cum-popular-science-writer Richard Dawkins (2007), the philosopher Daniel Dennett (2006), the neurobiology student Sam Harris (2004), and the journalist Christopher Hitchens (2007). They argue strongly, for instance in the *God Delusion* authored by Dawkins and in *God is Not Great* authored by Hitchens, that science and religion are opposed all the way down; adding that it’s science that is right and religion that is wrong. In a way, their religious counterparts are people like the Young Earth Creationists and other biblical literalists (Ruse 2005); however, paradoxically, we often find that these latter people deny strongly that they are conflict theorists. To the contrary, they argue that they and they alone have the science right, and that once their viewpoint is accepted one can see

that there is no conflict between science and religion. The merits of this position will be left as an exercise for the reader!

Suppose, however, that although one recognizes conflict between science and religion, one is by no means convinced that this conflict must be universal and definitive. Many theists (and their non-believing sympathizers) argue that their religion, properly understood, avoids the clashes mentioned in the last paragraph (Ruse 2001). But if one allows that science and religion are not necessarily in conflict, which then of Barbour's three other categories should one choose? For fairly obvious reasons, non-believers who want nevertheless to avoid the conflict thesis (the new atheists often refer to them somewhat contemptuously as "accommodationists") tend to opt for the independence option. Here we see science and religion simply talking about different things and hence unable to conflict. The best-known secular thinker who took this option in recent years was the late Stephen Jay Gould, a paleontologist and one who rivaled Dawkins as a popular science writer. In his book, *Rocks of Ages* (1999), Gould introduced the notion of a "Magisterium." This is a way of looking at things, in a sense a little bit like a Kuhnian paradigm writ large. Gould argued that science and religion are different Magisteria. Science tells us about the empirical world, whereas religion tells us about the moral world.

There are, today, many theists who are also attracted to the independence category. Among Christians, these are generally people who have been much influenced by the great Protestant thinker Karl Barth and, going back to the nineteenth century, the Danish theologian and writer Søren Kierkegaard. Note that these people, often known as the neo-orthodox, do not take exactly the same position as someone like Gould. For instance the Chicago theologian Langdon Gilkey (1959; 1985), who was the most noted Christian exponent of this position in recent time, would certainly have thought that religion is more than just a matter of morality. For the Christian, it is about God and His existence, the special relationship between humans and God, the crucifixion and resurrection, and the consequent possibility of eternal life. Probably some neo-orthodox persons are happy to interpret much of this metaphorically. They would not insist on a literal resurrection. Others, however, do want to claim that the gospel stories are essentially literally true. It is just that they do not think that the story of Creation or of the subsequent Incarnation and Atonement are matters of science. We accept religion on faith and leave things at that, not trying to offer empirical justification.

The third Barbour option, that of dialogue, is one that appeals naturally to Roman Catholics. They have always taken seriously natural theology, that is to say proofs for the existence of God based on evidence and reason. Clearly, if one accepts that there are twin paths to understanding and accepting the deity, one based on reason and one based on faith, then at some level one is engaged in a form of dialogue. This would also seem to apply to Protestant thinkers such as John Polkinghorne (1986). He clearly accepts the existence of God as a matter of faith. He believes, however, that the physical constants of the universe are such that they are "fine tuned" for the existence of life. The constants cannot have occurred by chance. Accepting this line of thought, known as "anthropic" thinking, is clearly going beyond the independence option. Although one is keeping science and religion essentially separate, one is accepting and endorsing points of contact and overlap—points that at some level can be taken to strengthen both sides of the relationship.

Finally we have the fourth of Ian Barbour's categories, one incidentally that I suspect appeals strongly to him. This is where we get some kind of integration between science

and religion. It is felt that if indeed God is creator and, as it were, overseer of the world, then one virtually expects that the ways of science and the ways of religion will be manifestations of the same essential truths, and that hence one can work profitably for overall integration. In this last century, the Jesuit paleontologist priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1955) would seem to have been a major representative of the integration option. He believed that the path of evolution leads up from the very simple, the blob as it were, all the way up to humankind, and perhaps even further to God. (This final point, the “Omega Point,” he identified in some way with Jesus Christ.) For Teilhard, therefore, what he found in the rocks, namely the upward progressive motion of life, was at one with what he found in the gospels, namely the eventual emergence of the Savior. Others who seem in ways sympathetic to an integration position include supporters and followers of the Anglo-American philosopher Alfred North Whitehead. These people, often known as “process philosophers,” see the godhead as itself involved in the changing and evolving universe (Birch 1965). God is not the God of St Augustine, eternal, unchanging, omnipotent. Rather, God has given up His powers, through “kenosis,” and now works to influence change rather than to dictate it. This means, in the language of the American Lutheran theologian, Philip Hefner (1993), we and God are co-creators.

I do not offer these categories (nor indeed does Barbour) intending definitively to endorse one over the other. They are offered more in the spirit of clarification than of promotion.

Preliminary Thoughts

With the four positions now laid out, let us dig a little more deeply into the issues at stake. I take it that if you believe the conflict position to be correct, then this is basically the end of the discussion. Science triumphs and religion is defeated! At best religion is harmless superstition and at worst—and this is certainly the fear of the new atheists—religion promotes unhappiness and discontent at just about every level. The individual is torn by conflicting demands; the group is divided internally by rival ideologies and threatened externally by those of different religious convictions.

However, speaking now on behalf of religion, it is by no means obvious that the conflict thesis is as correct as is assumed (hardly argued) by the new atheists and their fellow travelers. For a start, the belief that religion can itself evolve in some sense in the face of scientific developments is hardly an *ad hoc* hypothesis, formulated to meet recent challenges. Not only does this strategy have a long history, but also there are good theological reasons for accepting it. Christians point out that St Augustine, writing around 400 CE, stressed that sometimes the words of Scripture must be interpreted metaphorically or allegorically. Augustine (1982) emphasized that God could not have used the language of science or philosophy when speaking to the ancient Jews, and that consequently he felt it necessary to speak to them in metaphors and symbolically. There is, however, no need for us to be thus constrained. If science—which incidentally comes through the use of our senses and reason (things which proclaim that we are made in the image of God)—shows that things like the creation story of Genesis cannot possibly be supported scientifically, then it is obligatory for the Christian to take account of this and to understand such stories as allegory. They are true but not literally true.

For a second, against the new atheists, many of the criticisms they launch are somewhat less than well taken. For instance, Richard Dawkins (1986) makes much of the way

in which Darwinian evolutionary theory explains the design-like nature of the living world. He constantly points out that this means that after *On the Origin of Species* was published in 1859, there was no need to invoke a designing deity to explain these characteristics. But while this is indeed true, it does not follow that God does not exist. At most it shows that God might not be necessary for some explanatory purposes, and hence non-belief is possible. It does not prove that non-belief is obligatory. (None of this is to deny that the new atheists make telling points against some of the social deficiencies of organized religion. However, one hardly needed the aid of science to make these criticisms. The problems are as troubling to many believers as they are to non-believers.)

Both the dialogue and integration positions have and will continue to have supporters. However, although it is obviously the case that non-believers will be unwilling to endorse either of the positions, it is also the case that many theists feel discomfort with the categories. For instance, many Christians, both Protestant and Catholic, find process theology to be deeply heretical. If the cost of accepting evolution is that of also accepting an evolving God, where we humans are to be creators with God, then evolution will be firmly rejected. To deviate from the Augustinian vision will be thought quite wrong. The price of integration is too high. In addition, many theists reject Teilhard's system, with its determinism seeming almost complacent in the face of threats such as a nuclear holocaust, quite apart from the fact that those who accept modern evolutionary theory are most uncomfortable with the kind of pre-determined, progressive upwards climb to humankind that his theology demands. And turning to dialogue, one finds many Christians today much opposed to natural theology. As is well known, Barth was withering on the subject. Among Catholics also there are questions. For instance the nineteenth-century theologian, John Henry Newman, who changed from being Anglican to being Catholic, and who stands today on the verge of sainthood, felt very uncomfortable about natural theological claims. He believed that reason points to a Greek God of supreme, eternal power. For himself, as a Christian, he opted rather for the Jewish God of love and mercy and forgiveness. This God he accepted through faith and not by any other way (Ruse 2005).

Let me now turn to the independence option. It raises some interesting issues, not all of which have yet been resolved. I want to ask three questions. First, why should science and religion be independent and what might the boundaries between them be? Is someone like Gould correct in restricting religion to the purely ethical, or is there a place for someone like Gilkey who would make more substantive ontological claims in the name of religion? Second, can religion properly and fruitfully speak to the issues on which science is silent? In other words, even if science cannot do everything, is it appropriate now to turn to religion for answers? Third, what of some of the traditional difficulties that are thought to separate science and religion? I shall look at three: (i) the problem of evil; (ii) the problem of miracles; and (iii) the problem of mystery.

Science as Metaphorical

Start with the question of why science and religion should be independent and what the boundaries between them might be. This seems to me to be an obvious question to ask but, somewhat surprisingly, there does not seem to have been much attention paid to it. Assuming that it is a question worth asking and that there is not so obvious an answer that no one has thought worth mentioning it, I will therefore venture a solution of my own. (I have given a much fuller exposition of my thinking in Ruse 2010.)

The most fundamental thing to understand about science is that, although it is about the empirical world, it is anything but a disinterested, objective report of absolute reality (Ruse 1999). It is not a police pathologist's photograph. It is much more akin to a Van Gogh painting—one that clearly reflects essential aspects of reality, but at the same time comes to us viewed through the mirror of the artist's own personality; a painting that tells us as much about the painter as it does about cornflowers or fields of wheat. In the case of science, as has been repeatedly emphasized by such commentators as Thomas Kuhn (1977), we have a painting in words, and the medium through which the scientist reflects interests and intentions is through metaphor—saying things literally false but analogous in important and illuminating ways. That scientists do use metaphor is an undeniable commonplace. If you look at any area of science you find that metaphors abound: force, work, attraction, repulsion, in physics; genetic code, tree of life, natural selection, balance of nature, in biology; Oedipus complex, bottleneck, invisible hand, in the social sciences.

As well as these surface metaphors, there are also fundamental metaphors that pervade and direct the whole scientific enterprise. Back at the time of the Greeks, the fundamental metaphor was that of organism. People such as Plato and Aristotle viewed everything from an organic perspective. That is why, for instance, it made perfectly good sense for an ancient astronomer to ask about purposes in a way that would be considered quite inappropriate today. At the time of the Scientific Revolution, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there was a change in the fundamental metaphor. Scientists went from looking through the lens of the organism to looking through the lens of the machine. The world was regarded as if it were a giant clock, grinding eternally through the motions. The story of science from the sixteenth century to the present has been one of the triumph of the machine metaphor, or, as it is rather better known, the triumph of mechanism. First, thanks to people such as Galileo, Descartes, and Newton, the inorganic world was seen as clock-like. Second, in the nineteenth century particularly, thanks to the physiologists such as Claude Bernard and the evolutionists such as Charles Darwin, the world of organisms was, likewise, seen through the lens of the machine. As Richard Dawkins (1976) said in one of those felicitous phrases for which he is justly famous, we now know that organisms are nothing but "survival machines." Third, in recent years the move has been to bring the human brain and mind under the canopy of mechanism. As they work with the metaphor of the brain as a computer, cognitive scientists are open in this desire. Whether or not they will be ultimately successful is a matter of debate and we shall refer to it again shortly.

As students of metaphor stress, there are great benefits from using metaphors but also costs or limitations. On the one side, one can push forward rapidly in empirical enquiry. For instance, when molecular biologists started to ask questions about the "genetic code," they were able to make immediate and profound discoveries about the nature of heredity. On the other side, metaphors restrict one's enquiry. It is all rather like putting blinkers on a racehorse. Thanks to a metaphor, many questions are simply ruled out of court. Suppose, for instance, that I say my beloved is a red rose. At once you know things about her. She is beautiful and is perhaps also somewhat lush and full—as opposed to, say, a farm girl unkindly described as a bit of a clod, somewhat solid and, let us hope, with values that compensate for her surface lack of looks. However, there are many things about which I am simply not talking. I'm not for instance telling you about my beloved's religion, or her mathematical abilities. It is not so much that I do

not know about her religion or her mathematical abilities, it is simply that when I use the metaphor of a rose, I am just not talking about those things.

Applying this directly to modern science. It is clear that 400 years of looking at the world as if it were machine has paid incredible dividends. But I want here to focus on the limits rather than the strengths. Because science depends on metaphor, I expect it to run out of steam. Hence, my question is: What is it that the mechanism metaphor simply does not allow the scientist to ask? Let me offer four possibilities. First, when talking about machines one is not talking about ultimate origins. You can certainly ask where the copper in your kettle was obtained and whether the rubber on your tires is synthetic. But ultimately one takes the ingredients for granted. Extending this to the whole of modern science, I suggest therefore that the machine metaphor rules out questions about the ultimate origins of reality. One can certainly ask about the Big Bang and so forth; but worrying about why there is something rather than nothing is just not a matter for science.

A second question ruled out by the machine metaphor concerns the ultimate nature and origins of morality. Of course machines can be useful for good or for ill. But the use does not lie in the machine as such. Rather, it lies in the agent using the machine. Is a computer a good thing? It all depends. If it is used by a student writing an essay, it is a good thing. If it is used by a terrorist to hack into a nation's security system, it is a bad thing. Again, what I am suggesting, therefore, is we have a boundary to science. The world just is and what we should do with it is not a question of science. (Of course, knowledge of the world is important in deciding what moral action is. The point is that knowledge of the world can never be definitive in deciding which actions are morally justified and which are not.)

I would argue that a third question the machine metaphor is simply not capable of answering is that raised by consciousness. As I intimated above, this is a somewhat contentious claim. There are those, for instance the philosopher Daniel Dennett (1992), who think that now we can explain all we need to know about consciousness in terms of computer functioning. Others, however, and I am one, think that this is absurdly optimistic (Chalmers 1997). Consciousness seems to us to be an emergent phenomenon. We are followers of the great German philosopher Leibniz, who pointed out that however much you understand the workings of the mechanism it never seems to give you any insight into thinking. Of course, today, we know a great deal about how the brain does affect thinking. But that is not the same as saying that understanding the brain as a machine leads to an understanding of why we have the kinds of internal experiences we associate with consciousness, with sentience. So here again we have a point beyond which science does not seem to venture.

Fourth, and finally, the machine metaphor does not tell us about ultimate purposes. This might seem to be a rather odd point, because surely one of the things about machines is that they are made for purposes. One does not build an automobile just for fun. Rather, one builds an automobile to take people from one point to another. But while this is all true, as the machine metaphor as applied to the world evolved, increasingly scientists found it unprofitable to ask about ends. They wanted, rather, simply to think of the world as a functioning machine, which might or might not have had a direction. Originally, of course, scientists thought that the world was a machine made by God. But rapidly, in the words of one of the greatest historians of the Scientific Revolution (Eduard Jan Dijksterhuis in *The Mechanization of the World Picture* (1986)), scientists started to regard God as a "retired engineer." So here again we have a limitation on science.

This, then, is the answer to my first question. Science and religion should be independent because of the limitations of science which follow from the fact that scientists regard the world as a machine. In doing so they are using a metaphor. Metaphors have limitations. Hence, regarding the world as a machine has limitations. Among the limitations of the machine metaphor are that it does not allow us to raise questions in the following four areas: questions about why there is something rather than nothing; questions about the ultimate ground of morality; questions about the nature of consciousness; and questions about the purpose of the world and the contents within. Let us move on now to the second question, namely, whether religion can appropriately speak to these limitations.

The Answers of Religion

We need to make two very important clarifying points as we begin this stage of the discussion. First, any answers that are given by religion cannot be scientific answers. This might seem obvious, but it is worth stressing. Critics, especially the new atheists, often sneer at the answers of religion. It might, indeed, be the case that their criticisms of the answers of religion are well taken. But it is not fair to criticize religion because it is not offering a scientific-type answer. It is just not in that business. Conversely, the religious thinker should not strive to emulate or equal the scientific thinker at the scientist's own game. If you take the independence position seriously, science and religion are just not competing. Second, nothing in this discussion should be taken as implying that one must offer and accept a religious answer to questions left open by science. It is perfectly possible for someone simply to take a skeptical or agnostic position. When asked about something like ultimate origins, a skeptic can and should say simply: "I just don't know."

Start, then, with the question about why there is something rather than nothing. The theist has an answer to this question: the world and everything in it was created by God. And that basically is all there is to it. Although that's not really the case, because now the theist must go on to explain why his or her explanation is not a scientific explanation and thus not a rival to hypotheses about the Big Bang and the like. The theist has a ready, and I would stress traditional, answer. Hypotheses like the Big Bang are hypotheses about events in this world. Even if one says one knows nothing before the Big Bang, nevertheless everything that one is claiming is about the dimension of material existence. However, when the theist talks about God as creator, he or she is saying something rather different. The claim of the theist is that God is in some sense the ground of our being. God is not an entity in the world but, rather, the cause and condition of the world existing. God for the theist, therefore, has to be a necessary being in some sense. God has no need of a cause any more than the truth of " $2 + 2 = 4$ " has need of a cause. (It is for this reason that when someone like Richard Dawkins joins with every sophomore taking a philosophy of religion class in worrying about what caused God, his concerns are entirely otiose. God is not part of the world's causal chains.)

There are additional questions now about whether the notion of a necessary being makes sense. But here the caution noted at the beginning of this section kicks in. The fact that there is no such thing as a necessary being in science is no criticism of the theistic position. As it happens, for Christians at least, there are 2,000 years of theological debate about the possibility of necessary beings. It is usually stressed that the necessity is not that of logic. Although supporters of the ontological argument would demur, the

general theological position is that God's necessity is something rather different, where his existence and his essence are one and the same. The usual term for this is "aseity" (Hick 1961). Please note that because the scientist is in no position as a scientist to criticize this notion, it does not follow that the notion is beyond critique. It is perfectly legitimate for the skeptic or other critic to argue that aseity ultimately makes no sense and falls apart. But this is a philosophical or theological criticism of a philosophical or theological concept. As far as science is concerned, the theist can legitimately speak of God as creator.

Move next to morality. Here we enter familiar ground, for the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1778) had anticipated the argument made earlier. Claims about matters of fact cannot explain or justify claims about matters of morality. As today's philosophers say, you cannot properly go from "is" statements to "ought" statements. Does this mean that science has nothing to say about morality? There is no one fixed answer from scientists and other secular thinkers about this question. Some seem simply to think that this is all there is to be said on the matter. One perhaps intuitively morality as one intuitively mathematics. It is not part of the physical world but objective nevertheless, and binding upon us. Others, and I include myself here, think that science does have something to say on the subject (Ruse 1986, 1999). I have argued that as far as moral dictates are concerned—what is known as "normative ethics"—science can tell us quite a bit about their nature. Modern evolutionary biology stresses that being social is an important part of adaptive fitness, and I have argued (with many others) that the usual moral norms of friendship, loyalty, and above all fairness, are precisely what one would expect to emerge from the Darwinian mechanism of natural selection. This, of course, does not justify our moral beliefs. As far as what philosophers call metaethical justification is concerned, I have argued that in fact evolutionary biology suggests that there is no such justification! In other words, I am not violating Hume's law going from "is" to "ought." I am simply saying that nothing supports moral statements other than the biology-driven, psychological conviction that they are right. (This position is often known as "ethical skepticism.")

Whether or not you are a "moral realist," in the sense of believing that there are objective foundations to morality, or a "moral non-realist," in the sense of believing that there are no objective foundations to morality (the position I just endorsed in the last paragraph), there is no reason why the theist should feel threatened. Indeed, either way the theist can jump in and argue that God has an essential role to play in our moral understanding. If you are a moral realist, then you simply say that God created the norms of morality, just as he created the truths of mathematics. If you are a moral non-realist, then perhaps an extra step is needed. Note that the moral non-realist is not claiming that there is no morality, in the sense that there are no moral laws (that is to say that substantive ethics is non-existent). So the moral non-realist is not arguing for a position contrary to basic theistic ethics. The theistic moral non-realist has to argue that, in some sense, it is God who is responsible for the beings, that is to say the human beings, who believe and act in the ways that they do. In other words, the moral non-realist has to argue that God made us as we are, and that because we are as we are, we have the moral beliefs that we have, and that is all there is to it. It will not have escaped the reader's attention, that for the Christian theist at least, this is very familiar territory. It is a version of the Thomistic natural law theory. According to Aquinas, much influenced by Aristotle, morality is a matter of doing what is natural to us as human beings. Thus, for instance, suicide is immoral simply because it is unnatural. There is no need of

an additional moral law preventing suicide. It is all a matter of the way that God made us. Hence, while I am arguing that the moral non-realist as such has no need of God, I am also allowing that if one believes in God it is perfectly legitimate to go the extra step and to argue that God stands behind morality, inasmuch as He made us as we are.

Consciousness, again, provides a nice example of the theist offering an explanation that is not that of the scientist. The theist cannot and should not be claiming that he or she is explaining consciousness as something arising from the material brain. Presumably today's theist will believe this, but the theist is not adding something more at this level that is hidden from the secular, cognitive scientist. The theist, and again let me stress this is particularly the tradition of the Christian theist, argues that humans are made in the image of God. Hence, we have consciousness that enables us to observe and understand the world around us, the world that God has created, as well as to act as moral beings. This for the theist is the beginning and end of things. Consciousness is what we humans share with our God. There is, of course, more that the theist might want to add. The question arises as to whether mind can be separated from body, as was argued by Plato and, following him, St Augustine, or whether mind and body are somehow intimately intertwined, as was argued by Aristotle and St Thomas, not to mention the Jewish tradition particularly as represented by St Paul. But whilst one can see that understanding science might guide one somewhat in thinking about these questions, ultimately one's answers are going to be theological and not scientific.

Finally, there is the question about the ultimate purpose of things, and the possibility for theists of some kind of eternal existence united with God. The scientist, as we have seen, has nothing to say. The theist wants to argue that eternal existence is a possibility. But although as a skeptic one might want to stay silent on this issue, I see nothing to prevent the theist from making his or her claims. Obviously any eternal existence is going to be of a kind and dimension that is not physical; but we have already experienced this kind of existence earlier in the context of God himself. Again, this is not to say that one is barred from criticizing the theist on theological grounds. There are presumably all sorts of questions one might ask about the nature of the eternal existence and why indeed it might be considered desirable. (The philosopher Bernard Williams (1973) once wrote an article rather cutely subtitled "Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality.") But these questions and criticisms are not based on science. Science says nothing, and so science should not complain when others want to say something.

Long-Standing Problems

Turn, finally, to the three problems highlighted earlier as potential barriers to theistic belief in the face of modern science. First, there is the perennial problem of evil. If God is all-loving and all-powerful, how then do we explain the existence of evil in the world? God surely would want to prevent evil, and God can prevent evil, and yet evil exists. Many of the new atheists, Richard Dawkins (1995) most notably, think that modern science exacerbates this problem. They argue, making particular reference to Darwin's theory of evolution, that science stresses how life is a struggle for existence, with all the subsequent pain and suffering. A good God, they argue, would have found some other way to make organisms. More than this, a good God would have made organisms in ways very different from those in which we find them today. Lions are superb predators with all sorts of adaptations for catching, killing and devouring their prey. This can only be unpleasant for the antelope or other victim. Apparently the Creator not only

allows this, but positively endorses and promotes such a state of affairs. In the words of Christopher Hitchens, God is not great!

In response, I agree that the problem of evil is a major problem for the theist. I would go so far as to say that I am not at all sure that the problem can be solved in a satisfactory way. Whether it be the suffering at Auschwitz or the suffering after the earthquake in Haiti, we have a probably overwhelming argument against the traditional theistic notion of God. However, let me stress that this is not quite the point at issue here. It is not whether or not theism can be reasonably maintained, but whether science in some sense adds to the difficulties of being a theist. And I am not at all sure that the answer is quite that which Richard Dawkins draws (Ruse 2001). Speaking to the problem of evil, traditionally theists draw a distinction between moral evil, that is to say evil caused by human beings, and natural evil, that is to say evil caused by natural phenomena. In the case of moral evil, theists argue that it is a consequence of human free will, and that God decided it was better that we have free will (even though evil could follow) than that we be fully determined (even though there is no consequent evil). Whether or not this argument works is one question, but there seems little in modern science to deny the strategy as such.

One might, perhaps, want to argue that, if one is committed to a scientific perspective, then one is committed to the world being seen as completely governed by natural laws, and that this means that humans as part of the natural world are law-bound and hence not free. However, as David Hume pointed out, one can with at least as much justification argue that if we are not law-bound then we are not free. Not being law-bound means we do things randomly or as matters of chance, and this is certainly not what we usually associate with freedom. Freedom means acting responsibly without constraints, not outside the realm of law. So this argument fails. Moreover one might argue that modern evolutionary theory, if anything, gives humans an extra dimension of freedom over and above that of plants and most other animals. The greatest adaptation humans have is being able to respond to their environments, including their social environments, in the face of new problems or difficulties. In other words, even though we are law-bound, we are rather like those machines that can readjust and re-aim in the face of obstacles (Dennett 1984). At this level, therefore, we are free in a way that, for instance, a machine which once set on track and unable to readjust is not free. Humans are free in a way that turnips are not. The farmer heads towards us with a spade, we can run away. That is not an option for a turnip.

With respect to natural evil the traditional theistic response is that of Leibniz. He argued that God being omnipotent does not mean that He could do the logically impossible. God could only make the best world that could be made. Thus, for instance, being burnt is painful, but not feeling the pain is worse, because then the burning could get even more severe. Paradoxically, Richard Dawkins (1983) has argued about the operation of the evolutionary process in a way that, if anything, supports the theist at this point. Dawkins claims that the world's adaptive nature could only have come about through a process like natural selection. Random change does not lead to adaptive excellence. It is the slow process of winnowing between different variations that leads to such design-like entities as the eye and hand. Hence, the theist can well argue that, if God decided to create through law—and there are obvious theological reasons why God might have decided to create through law—then the only way in which this could have been done (to produce the kind of world that we have) is through the mechanism of natural selection. In other words, the pain and suffering brought on by selection is a

lesser evil than our not having the resulting wonderfully adaptive world we experience today. In short, far from science making the problem of evil worse, if anything it offers the theist support in his or her responses.

Miracles are a difficulty for the theist in the face of modern science. Science claims the world goes according to unbroken law, and yet the theist's claim is that occasionally God intervenes and things go in ways otherwise than they normally would. What can the theist say in defense of his or her position? There are two traditional answers given, at least by the Christian (Mullin 2000). I am not sure the scientist can stop either of them. First, one might argue, in the spirit of St Augustine, that a miracle is something that is unexpected and perhaps even inexplicable given modern understanding. This, however, does not mean that miracles stand outside natural laws. It is, rather, that either we do not know the laws or we did not anticipate that the laws would come together in such a way. Or perhaps we do know the laws and their action, but nevertheless we want to give some special symbolic significance to an event and hence speak of it as miraculous. When the British Army escaped in the spring of 1940 from France, fleeing the Germans, they were able to do so because the English Channel was atypically calm. Many people afterwards spoke of the "miracle" of Dunkirk. This did not mean that they thought that God necessarily had lifted or changed the laws of meteorology, but that they thought the escape was of particular significance—the army was able to escape and thus could regroup and once again face off the menace of Hitler. The second response open to the theist is made in the spirit of St Thomas. Here one does agree that miracles involve events or phenomena outside the course of nature. However, one points out that God as creator holds the world immanently in His hands all the time anyway. If He wants to suspend things for a while, then that is His ability and right. Miracles are not scientific nor do they conflict with science because, at the time they occur, science simply does not apply. I should add that most theists caution restraint with respect to this strategy. It is legitimate to speak of miracles when one is speaking in the context of human salvation (McMullin 1993). For this reason it is legitimate to speak of the miracle of the resurrection. However, one should be wary of invoking miracles of this kind simply when one does not know. This is the "God of the gaps" strategy and rightfully condemned by most theologians. Normally, God works through law and intervenes miraculously only when the reasons are big enough, and that generally means when the ultimate fate of humankind is involved. Particularly when endorsing this Thomistic strategy, let me stress that it is probably sensible for the believer not to make claims about miracles based on reason and evidence. As David Hume pointed out, that way can only lead to criticism. It is better to accept miracles on faith and thus simply make oneself immune to scientific criticism.

Finally, the question of mystery. The theists argue that there are times when we are simply faced with the unknown. Religion leaves us in the dark about ultimate reality. As St Paul says, "we see through a glass darkly." Is this not an appeal to irrationality, something which is not just alien to the scientist, but positively offensive? Is it not legitimate for the scientist at this point to say that religion behaves in unacceptable ways? There are two points to be made here in response. First: to caution that the scientific pot should be wary of calling the religious kettle black. Today's science contains mysteries of its own. In particular, quantum mechanics specifies definitively that there are questions one is not allowed to ask, most particularly about the action of electrons taken individually. One can deal with matters statistically, but to focus on actual occurrences is ruled illicit. The theist can argue that he or she is doing little different when

he or she says that the face of God is unknown. Second: the theist can point out that it is modern science itself that leads us to expect there will be areas of existence that we are not capable of grasping. Again to refer to the thinking of Richard Dawkins (1995), it is he who has pointed out that we do not expect evolution to have given us the ability to understand everything. We are mid-range primates with the adaptations to get out of the jungle and onto the plain. The wonder is that with these adaptations we can understand as much as we can understand. There is no reason to think that the adaptations would lead us to understand everything. Hence, perhaps mystery is built into our very nature. None of this is to say that the theist has a license to believe anything, however absurd. If reason applies, then the theist no less than the scientist should employ it. It is, rather, to say that there might be a limit to reason and in acknowledging this fact the theist shows no essential weakness.

Conclusion

There is much more that could be said particularly in the context of particular sciences. It is, however, hoped that this general overview will provide a useful background for the more detailed discussion found in other chapters of this volume.

Related Topics

Chapter 4: Christianity; Chapter 10: Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Intellectual Life; Chapter 11: Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Intellectual Life; Chapter 13: Evidence; Chapter 14: Naturalism; Chapter 17: Evolution; Chapter 26: Cognitive Science

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Recommended Reading

- Barbour, I. (1997) *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues*, San Francisco, CA: Harper. The classic introduction to the science–religion relationship, giving a detailed taxonomy of the possible interactions.
- Harrison, P. (ed.), (2010) *The Cambridge Companion to Science and Religion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. A new edited survey of the science–religion relationship, covering issues from antiquity to the present.
- Miller, K. (1999) *Finding Darwin's God*, New York: Harper and Row. A stimulating personal essay, by a practicing Christian, on the challenges to religious belief in the age of science, with much good material on the false directions taken by many believers.
- Ruse, M. (2001) *Can a Darwinian be a Christian? The Relationship between Science and Religion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. A philosophical overview of the challenges that modern Darwinism poses for the practicing Christian, concluding that it is possible, but not easy, to embrace both systems.

17

EVOLUTION

Jeffrey Schloss and Michael J. Murray

In popular discourse, evolution is often seen as a challenge to religion because of the apparent inconsistency between Darwinian and biblical accounts of the origin and diversity of life. However, while concerns about the conformity of evolution with the biblical narrative have been prominent since 1859, the range of philosophical and theological issues raised by evolution is significantly broader and more subtle. In what follows we will examine six points of contact between evolution and theism that are of substantial and contemporary relevance (Schloss 2006; Murphy and Schloss 2008).

Before proceeding it will be of value to clarify exactly what we mean by “evolution.” The most parsimonious definition involves an observed process: “change in the genetic constitution of a population over time.” However, as the notion is typically construed, evolution entails other commitments as well. Thus, second, evolution affirms common descent, which is the conclusion that the process of heritable change over time has generated all extant and extinct species from shared primordial ancestry.

Third, evolution is not simply a description of change through time or an inference about what such change has accomplished, but is also an explanation for how and why genetic change occurs. Thus “evolution” also refers to a variety of processes that are hypothesized (and in many cases have been shown) to play a role in accounting for heritable change over time. A fundamental and widely confirmed mechanism of evolutionary change is mutation-and-selection, which provides an origin for phenotypic variations, subsequently amplified or eliminated on the basis of reproductive utility. However, there are also a variety of other proposals for evolutionary natural processes underlying the origin, nature, and retention of variation.

As we use the term here, evolution will refer to this tripartite set of claims: genetic change over time, common ancestry, and one or more natural processes that are invoked to explain those changes.

Evolution and Revelation

Anyone following discussions in contemporary science and religion knows that a frequently raised issue related to evolution is its conformity with sacred texts, particularly in the Abrahamic traditions. Since the topics treated in this volume concern theism broadly understood, we will not dwell on this topic at length. However, the centrality of this objection to evolutionary theory makes the issue worthy of mention. Although a number of scripturally based arguments challenging evolution have been raised within theistic traditions, the most important and recurring concerns are raised by reflecting on the creation accounts in Genesis.

A number of Fundamentalist Christian (Sarfati 2002), ultra-Orthodox Jewish (see Slifkin 2006), and a rapidly increasing contingent of Muslim theologians and lay believers (Yahya 2003) continue to maintain that the early chapters of Genesis teach that all major forms of life are directly created by God over a very short span of time, that the universe itself is relatively young (with an age measured in thousands of years) and that human beings, in particular, are not descended from non-human forms of life. These beliefs directly contradict central evolutionary claims since they deny common ancestry, the appeal to natural mechanisms to explain biological diversity, and a long history of life on earth.

Whether or not the Bible or Qur'an provides theistic believers with defeaters for belief in evolution depends on the answers to two questions. First, do religious believers have good reason to trust the relevant sacred text? And second, do those texts affirm claims that are inconsistent with, or reduce the likelihood of, the truth of evolution?

The first issue is more a question of religious apologetics, which we will not address here. However, there is an important nuance associated with this question that many religious believers elide, especially those who are inclined to deny evolution on scriptural grounds. One might object that the issue is not whether religious believers have reason to trust their sacred texts but, rather, whether they have reason to trust *their favored interpretation of those texts*, especially when the empirical data of science seem to be at odds with those interpretations.

The historical record is filled with cases in which theological teaching conflicted with what the empirical data seemed to show and where, in the end, the theological teaching was abandoned. Some of those incidents have become emblematic in the history of the relationship between science and religion (the Galileo Affair and the Scopes Trial, for example). These have led religious critics to portray religion as an enterprise in perpetual intellectual retreat. Why giving up a cherished belief in the face of evidence to the contrary constitutes a "retreat" or loss in the case of modifying a religious notion, but an "advance" or victory in the case of relinquishing a scientific one is not at all clear. In any case, there are numerous less well-known historical cases where understandings of scriptural texts generated doubt about the scientific proposals that were later shown to be false. In the seventeenth century, those who adopted the physics of Descartes offered powerful reasons for thinking that the Roman Catholic claim that the bread and wine of communion become the body and blood of Christ is metaphysically impossible (and thus impossible even by way of miracle). If Cartesian physics were correct, the criticism was, in fact, sound. However, Catholic theologians were unwilling to surrender in the face of this claim—as they were initially in the face of Galileo's claim—though in this case they were ultimately vindicated.

Considering cases like this makes plain the epistemological balancing act that theologians and religious believers—and in fact anyone who believes that the different disciplines entail cognitive checks and balances—must engage in when confronting empirical data that intersects with claims outside the sciences. Religious believers who trust their sacred texts are always faced with the challenge of deciding whether or not new empirical data give them good reason to (a) revise their interpretation of a text that seems in conflict with the data, (b) abandon their trust in the sacred text, or (c) question the prevailing interpretation of the empirical data. Negotiating between these options can be difficult. But there is a negotiation. Christian theologians (both Roman Catholic and Protestant) were convinced the scriptural claims that "the earth is fixed and cannot be moved" demonstrated the falsity of Galileo's cosmology. When they later

revised this position, the revision did not come at the price of surrendering the truth of scripture but, rather, of surrendering a traditional interpretation. Religious believers who take their scriptures to challenge evolution are in a similar position.

This brings us to the second issue of whether or not the Bible and/or Qur'an do in fact make affirmations that conflict with evolution. This highly theological question is one that it would not be appropriate to tackle here. It is worth noting, however, that both conservative and liberal scholars in all three major traditions have argued that there is no such conflict. It is widely known that well before Darwin came on the scene, St Augustine defended an interpretation of Genesis that did not generate conflicts with the understanding of nature that prevailed at the time or contemporary notions of evolution (McMullin 1991). And recent biblical scholars have argued that a better understanding of the textual genres of the scriptural texts argue in favor of a more metaphorical understanding of their meaning (Walton 2009; Longman 2005; Longman and Carlson 2010). Religious believers within these traditions are obligated to weigh and update the respective evidential weight of the empirical data in comparison with the plausibility and theological centrality of their favored interpretation of the scriptural text.

Role of God as “Creator” of Life

In the last section we focused attention on theists whose reading of the scriptural creation narratives provide support for beliefs that are in conflict with evolution. However, many theists who are not inclined to interpret those texts literally still find reason, on philosophical grounds or from considerations of natural theology, for holding that life (and human life in particular) is not fully explainable by natural materialistic causes and that God is directly involved in its origin. Such theological commitments are in tension with the second and third planks of evolution, because divine involvement appears to deny or supplement both common ancestry and biogenesis or speciation by naturalistic processes.

Can God be the “creator” of some or all forms of life if evolution is true? On the most inclusive understanding of “creator” the answer is, of course, yes. God could be regarded as the creator of life even on a deistic view according to which He causes the universe and its laws to come into existence, and subsequent states of that universe, including the origination of life, result only from the uninterrupted working of those laws. In fact, the specific natural conditions necessary for life to arise has itself contributed to natural theology via fine-tuning arguments.

Is there a “less remote” way of understanding God’s creative role with respect to life that remains compatible with evolution as we have characterized it? Presumably any less remote way would involve some sort of divine action within creation that partially explains why various states of affairs in the history of life occurred when and as they did. Would such involvement necessarily preclude common ancestry or naturalistic causation? In construing nature as having conditions that were necessary but insufficient for the origin or diversification of life, this view rejects the adequacy of natural evolutionary causes. Whether it also rejects common ancestry is less straightforward and depends on the posited version of divine action and how common ancestry is understood.

Common ancestry entails reproductive descent with modification. Therefore, if God’s less remote involvement were to consist in creating human beings by miraculously forming them directly from dust, common ancestry would clearly be undermined,

since the human being created would not be a descendant of biological parents. There are, however, other modes of causal involvement that do not as obviously undermine common ancestry. For example, if God creates human beings by conferring an immaterial soul on what was formerly a wholly material primate (Miller 2000: 285; Pope John Paul II 1996), God is involved in creating “human life” within the process of common biological ancestry, though humans are constituted by more than biology.

But consider a case in which God’s causal involvement is more directly related to the strictly biological status of the organism. If God were to exert influence on the genetic material of a primate gamete—by directly causing a mutation or by influencing the outcome of probabilistic events like recombination or chromosomal assortment in ways that would present no evidence of intervention—is the resultant offspring a descendant of the parents? It is not immediately obvious that the answer is no (and for this reason some advocates of Intelligent Design claim assent to common ancestry). However, whether or not this is taken to be common descent, it is surely not descent via the natural mechanisms that are taken to govern the regularities of biological reproduction.

One question worth asking is what is gained theologically or philosophically from such notions of divine influence. On the one hand, and contrary to notions of either direct creation or supernatural ensoulment, the account of human nature that emerges from divine influence of mutations ends up affirming material continuity with primates and affords no privileges to human nature that could not be attained by mutations of non-human genomes. So one might think the advantages it offers entail resources not for theological anthropology but for understandings of providence. However, it is not clear that the outcome of such a process is any more consonant with attainment of divine purposes, than would be the emergence of humanity from natural processes ensuing from specially designed initial conditions.

Historical Adam

Some theological approaches within all three of the major monotheistic traditions embrace another distinctive claim that is in tension with evolution. Namely, that all human beings are descendants of a single human progenitor or human pair (Adam or Adam and Eve). It is important to say a brief word about the motivation for such theological commitments. In some cases the commitments are driven by a particular interpretive stance towards the creation narratives of the Bible or Qur’an. In other cases, the commitment is driven by more esoteric theological doctrines.

The implications of current evolutionary understanding for notions of Adamic descent depend on how Adam is interpreted. At one time, notions of the polyphyletic origins of humanity—the idea that humans arose in different times and places, and that human groups might have profoundly different characteristics if not natures—dominated evolutionary theory and were clearly irreconcilable not just with any understanding of common-ancestor-Adam but also with the most modest notions of shared origins or character for humanity made in the divine image. However, in contemporary debates the recent common origin (RCA or “out of Africa”) accounts of human origins have been favored by many interpretations of fossil, archeological, and genetic data (Ke et al. 2001; Pearson 2004; Weaver and Roseman 2008; DeSalle and Tattershall 2008; Amos and Hoffman 2010). And even multi-regional interpretations emphasize permeability and a common time frame for groups of modern humans (Relethford 2008; Templeton 2010). Indeed those who resisted the polyphyletic-inspired racism of the early 1900s on

theological (or ethical or anthropological) grounds appear to have been vindicated by genetic data. And modestly construing the Adamic narrative as affirming the unifamilial character of humanity is concordant with these data.

However, belief that all humanity arose from a single pair of progenitors is not compatible with recent findings of population genetics (Ayala 1995; Harpending et al. 1998; Behar et al. 2008). Some of the very studies that point to a common origin for humanity also affirm that the current human population is descended from a large group of individuals in the ancestral population and not a unique pair. Nevertheless, to say that humanity did not arise from a single pair is not the same thing as saying we do not all share an ancestor in our genealogies. That is, we can (and demonstrably do) all share one or more individuals in ancestry even though we are not descended from an initial human pair (Rohde et al. 2004; Cyran and Kimmel 2010). Given this, at least some interpretations of a historical Adam as a common ancestor but not single progenitor are reconcilable with contemporary evolutionary data.

Evolutionary Explanations of Religion

Over the last decade or so a number of evolutionary biologists and cognitive scientists have revisited a question asked by many: is there any evidence that religion is an innate feature of human mental faculties? It is not hard to see why someone might ask this question. No matter where you travel around the globe, every human community, culture, and nation has religion. And every human group that stays largely in one place has religious structures: churches, temples, pyramids, totems, shrines, etc. In light of the fact that religion is so pervasive, it is natural to think that there is something about the human mind that makes religion “natural” for us.

A substantial body of recent research has made it plain that human minds do have dispositions to religion-relevant beliefs. Research on infants shows that, from birth, we possess an amazing array of both ideas and inclinations to form ideas that far outstrip our available sensory evidence. These innate beliefs and dispositions make up what psychologists now call “folk beliefs.” We have folk beliefs in the domains of mathematics (that one and one equals exactly two, for example), physics (that objects move continuously through space), biology (that organisms give birth to organisms of the same species), psychology (that human beings have minds), and so on (Bloom 2004).

Where do these native cognitive endowments come from? A number of psychologists and evolutionary theorists think these apparently innate mental features are best explained by natural selection. On this view, if some of our human ancestors were born with or natively developed certain cognitive templates, which helped formulate reproductively useful beliefs without requiring that they be learnt from scratch, this would constitute a selective advantage.

However, there are a variety of types of “evolutionary explanations for belief” (Schloss 2009). One might think that evolutionary theory posits that every widespread trait exists because it provided some advantage to its ancestors. But this is not the case. Some traits exist because they increase fitness (that is, the ability to survive and reproduce). These traits are “adaptations.” However, other traits might be widespread because they are mere *byproducts* of adaptations, and such traits would exist even if they have no fitness benefits at all (or even, on their own, are injurious to fitness). These byproduct traits are often referred to as “spandrels.”

In light of these distinctions it will not be surprising to learn that scientific accounts of religion fall into different categories. Some explanations claim that religion arises from natural cognitive dispositions, while remaining silent on the evolutionary significance of religion itself. Others argue that religion exists because it is (or in our past was) an adaptation, and still others argue that religion is a spandrel. Those in the first camp vary on whether they view religion as an adaptation for the individual, for groups, or even for culturally transmitted replicators that reproduce at the expense of both individuals and groups. And those in the alternative camps divide into those who think that religion started out as a mere byproduct but then came to have a useful function later (an “exaptation”), those who think it is entirely neutral, and those who think that it is downright harmful.

There are, roughly speaking, five major scientific accounts of the origin of religion currently defended. Three of those are adaptationist accounts, and two are spandrel accounts. Before we turn to that most widely discussed (Cognitive) account, we will consider a summary of the alternatives. We first consider adaptationist accounts: *supernatural punishment theories*, *costly signaling theories*, and *group selection theories*.

Adaptationist theories tend to focus on one aspect of religion (a) that they take to be characteristic of religion generally, and (b) that can be shown to have specific fitness benefits. In particular, all of these explanations of religion (supernatural punishment theories (Johnson and Bering 2009), costly signaling theories (Bulbulia 2009), and group selection theories (Wilson 2002)) argue that the adaptive character of religion arises because of its *capacity to sustain cooperation between individuals in groups*. Whether on the level of cells or complex organisms, living in cooperative groups brings significant adaptive benefits both to the individuals in the group as well as to the group as a whole. Social organization allows groups of organisms to more effectively resist the challenges and utilize the resources of the biotic and abiotic environment.

However, while the potential benefits of group life are substantial, they are difficult to obtain and sustain in the face of threats of defection. For example, you and I both benefit if I agree to protect your property in return for you growing my food. But if I can get away with having you grow my food without having to spend my time protecting you, so much the better for me. The prospect of defection without loss of reward provides powerful incentives for members of the group to free-ride on the efforts of others, and this prospect constitutes the central problem of group life—a problem that must be solved if groups of organisms are going to enjoy the adaptive power of their numbers.

So how can we sustain cooperation and scare off potential cheaters? One answer is to punish the cheaters. We set up police forces, courts, prisons and so on expressly for the purpose of providing disincentives for those contemplating breaking the law. However, if there were a cheaper way of sustaining group cooperation, natural selection would, in general, tend to select for it. An ideal system of punishment would be one which costs nothing, was not liable to corruption, and could not be evaded. *Supernatural punishment theories* argue that religions tend to give us exactly this (Johnson and Bering 2009). Gods and ancestors are able to monitor our every move (and sometimes our every thought), holding us accountable when we deviate from the demands of morality or cooperation by threats of punishment in this life or the next. As a result, on these views, religion is an adaptation, which tends to “keep us in line” (for critical worries see Schloss and Murray 2011).

Costly signaling theories focus on the fact that religions tend to impose substantial costs on their members. Religions require people to forego not just pleasures, but ostensible necessities (through fasting, abstaining from potential sources of nutrition—cows for Hindus, pork for Jews—as well as avoiding sex, and so on), while also requiring substantial expenditures of resources (for building temples, churches, and shrines, giving tithes and offerings, sacrificing children, abstaining from work on certain holy days, devoting long stretches of time to religious ritual or learning, and so on). How could such costly practices survive and become widespread?

Costly signaling theorists argue that these evolutionary sacrifices are meant to serve as signs to others that individuals are indeed fully committed to the group, and thus to cooperation with its members (Sosis 2006). These costly displays thus allow those who are genuinely likely to cooperate to find one another and to affiliate. Those who are tempted to cheat would not be truly committed to the group and would thus be unwilling to put up these costly down payments. As a result, religions are adaptations that sustain cooperation by getting groups of cooperators together.

Finally, *group selection theories* focus on the ability of religious bonds and social structures to facilitate cooperation, including altruistically sacrificial acts by group members (Wilson 2002). Some of the mechanisms underlying this might involve punishment, costly signaling, or other devices proposed also to constitute adaptations at an individual level. But group selection involves the possibility that an individual might suffer a fitness decrement relative to some other group members, if the intergroup fitness advantage outweighs the intragroup variance.

We now turn to non-adaptationist theories. For the most part these theories fall into one of two categories: cognitive theories and meme theories, the first of which is predominant. Meme theories of religion are vastly underdeveloped (Dawkins 1993; Blackmore 2000). Indeed, it would be fair to say that no one has really laid out a full-blown memetic theory, but we can extrapolate from what has been developed to anticipate how such a theory might look.

Memes, a term coined by Richard Dawkins, are “units of cultural information.” These can be songs, recipes, stories, moral platitudes, technological innovations, and so on. Very crudely, memes are ideas that can be transmitted from mind to mind. Like genes, memes are susceptible to variation, and like genes, they can be more or less successful in passing themselves on. Some recipes, songs, poems, and so on “catch on” while others do not. Once we see this we can also see that memes, like genes, can evolve and be selected for. Recipes, architectural designs, clothing fashion, sitcoms, and so on vary in ways aimed at making them “catch on” even more than their predecessors. And those that are successful become the Betty Crockers, Frank Lloyd Wrights, Ralph Laurens, and Seinfelds of culture.

Meme theorists argue that religions exist and spread because they are good at exploiting belief acquisition tendencies that we naturally have. Richard Dawkins, for example, argues that one mode of meme transmission involves “parental instruction,” that is, children have an innate tendency to believe what parents tell them, and to do what their parents say. On this view, religion exists and spreads because religions instruct parents to pass along religious teachings to children who internalize them and pass them along to their children. Moreover, religious memes are typically represented as existing at the expense of the individual minds that transmit them, in other words, they are represented as viruses that exploit their hosts. This view of religion is non-adaptationist from the perspective of human well-being, but is adaptationist from the perspective of

memetic transmission. In any case, the negative evaluative judgment is not intrinsic to a memetic view of religion, which could be viewed as a beneficent symbiont or a neutral commensalist rather than viral pathogen.

The most widely held view, one that some have taken to calling the “standard model” of the origin of religion, is the Cognitive Model. This model (Barrett 2004, 2009) contends that human beings have specific and identifiable mental tools that make religious belief easy and natural. For example, we have a mental tool that makes us think there are agents around when we detect certain seemingly unnatural sounds (rustling in the bushes), motions (clothes blowing on the line at dusk), or configurations (crop circles) in nature.

This “hypersensitive agency detection device” (or HADD) leads us to hypothesize agents that, for example, control the forces of nature. When we (using the agency detection tool) are led to hypothesize agents causing the lightning or the wind, we are led to think that there are invisible agents. But invisible agents are counter-intuitive and strange. As a result, we easily remember them and talk about them, thus making such concepts (including religious concepts) spread rapidly.

In addition, there is very strong evidence that we are naturally disposed, from an early age, to see goal-directedness in everything, including the natural world. This tendency has come to be called “intuitive theism” (Kelemen 1999) by developmental psychologists, since it is a tendency to see purposiveness throughout our world. This naturally disposes us to believe in an invisible, counter-intuitive, purpose-giving force in the universe: gods or a God.

What does all of this evidence show us? Does it show, for example, that religion is just a trick that our minds play on us? Some scientists and philosophers have argued for a positive answer to this question (Alper 2000; Bloom 2005; Bering 2011).

While it seems that evolutionary explanations of belief might undermine belief, it is not clear why they should. The reason cannot simply be that we have native dispositions towards forming particular beliefs, since developmental psychologists have claimed to explain why human beings believe (from birth) things such as that: one and one equals two, animals give birth to offspring of the same species, and certain “unnatural” events are caused by agents, none of which beliefs are undermined by such explanations.

So the mere fact (if it is a fact) that we are naturally disposed to form, for example, belief in God, is no evidence that the belief is disreputable. But if that is not the problem, what is? At this point we need to engage in a little reverse engineering of our own, trying to reconstruct what it is that might have, or could, motivate such a conclusion. Here is another line of reasoning that might be at work: In some cases when we form beliefs, the cause of that belief is the target of the belief itself. I believe there is a computer in front of me *because there really is* or I believe my feet are propped up on the desk *because they really are*. What the accounts of religion reviewed above show us is that we have no good reason to think that our belief in God is due to the fact that God *is really there*. Instead, the God-belief seems to be caused by purely natural mechanisms that don’t involve God at all. As a result, God-beliefs come about in a very different way than our beliefs in more ordinary things do, and it is this difference which explains why, if these scientific accounts are right, religious beliefs are disreputable.

This line of argument is mistaken. I believe there is a deer in the neighborhood because I can see its tracks in the mud in my yard. I don’t see it directly of course, but I see things that are causal consequences of the deer’s presence, and this triggers in me a belief that it is around. What this line of argument does acknowledge is the possibility that the

mechanisms that lead us toward belief in God might be, like the deer tracks, causal consequences of God's activity. If that is right, then it would not be true that God *is not at all involved* in the origin of religious belief. God would be the (remote) cause of them. Of course, there is still a difference here. In the deer track case we *infer* the presence of the deer from the causal evidence, and in the divine case the beliefs are directly caused in us by the remote causal activity of God. But in both cases, the beliefs—in the deer and in God—are caused by the target of the belief acting in ways that cause the belief.

Thus, in order for this line of argument against the legitimacy of God-beliefs to work, the critic would have to demonstrate that human beings would exist and have minds that form God-beliefs *whether or not there were a God*. However, it is not clear why anyone should accept that, and it is clear that acceptance of that claim would require a defense that does not come from these theories alone.

Evolution and Divine Goodness

The existence of pain and suffering generally, and especially in the context of the creative process mediated by evolution, raises apparent philosophical challenges for theism. In order to address those challenges we need to be explicit about exactly what they are, and what solutions to them would look like.

To begin, it would be helpful to think about the problem of evil more generally. The phrase “problem of evil” is ordinarily taken to refer to one or another argument that reasons to atheism from the evidence of evil. The most widely discussed version of that argument can be stated as follows:

1. There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
2. An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
3. There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.

(Rowe 1996)

The key premise in this argument is the first one. On this argument, it is the existence of so-called “gratuitous evils” that raise the problem. So if one wants to resist this argument what tack should be taken? What is needed in order to undermine premise 1? The short answer is: the theist needs rational grounds on which he or she can reject the truth of (1). And what does that require? The following analogy is instructive. Imagine that a colleague of mine shows up at my office and reports, with a sly grin, that he was in Boston the day before, where he witnessed my wife sitting in a dark corner of a romantic restaurant holding hands with another man. I respond with disbelief since (a) I think my wife is not unfaithful to me, and (b) she told me that she was going to be in New York on that day. If I am convinced that my colleague really did see my wife in Boston, am I obliged to conclude that she is being unfaithful? Of course not! For all I know she made an emergency visit to Boston to meet with her brother-in-law whose wife is dying of cancer. And that is what I tell my colleague.

But now imagine that my colleague challenges my rejection of the “unfaithfulness hypothesis” by pointing out that I (a) don't *know* that my wife was meeting her

brother-in-law in Boston and, what is more (b) I don't have any evidence that my wife was meeting her brother-in-law in Boston. How could I reject the unfaithfulness hypothesis on the grounds that my wife was in Boston to meet her brother-in-law when I do not know this to be true, or even have any evidence that it is true?

Easily. I have an initial belief that I take to be well-founded that my wife is not being unfaithful to me. If someone presents me with apparent evidence to the contrary, I can reject that evidence if I have another explanation for the evidence that is an equally good explanation that is "true for all I know." To put this slightly more formally, we might say that I am rationally entitled to resist inferring an unpalatable explanation from a bit of evidence when I have an alternative explanation of that evidence that satisfies the following two conditions:

1. My alternative explanation of the evidence would, if true, explain away the evidence of the apparent infidelity; and
2. I am not warranted in rejecting this alternative explanation as false given the other things I reasonably accept.

When it comes to the problem of evil, the situation is analogous. If someone presents me with examples of evil, which, as far as they can tell, occur for no good reason, from which they conclude that there is no God, I can rationally resist that inference if I have an alternative explanation of the evidence that satisfies the two conditions above (Murray 2008).

Now that we have identified the generic problem—and the general parameters for what might count as a solution—how might the theist respond to the problem of "evolutionary evil"?

The first explanation we will consider is the one that has probably enjoyed the greatest popularity in the history of Christian theology, namely, the explanation rooted in the Fall of Adam and Eve. On that explanation, the moral wrongdoing, especially of Adam, unleashed cataclysmic consequences, not only for Adam and, more generally, the relationship between God and humanity, but also for the physical cosmos.

There are, however, two serious problems with the Fall as an explanation of evolutionary evil. The first is that the vast majority of the evil in evolutionary history pre-dates the Fall and thus, seemingly cannot be explained by it. However, even if that issue could be overcome, the Fall explanation faces a different worry not often addressed by its defenders. If the Fall were to have these catastrophic consequences for the structure and function of the physical cosmos, this could only occur because God initially set up the creation so that moral evils of this sort would have such natural consequences. But that, all on its own, seems to be a substantial flaw in the design of the cosmos. Such design seems to imply that the creation displayed a kind of fragility which made it liable to fracture and decay on a hair trigger.

There are variants of Fall explanations that would not be susceptible to this sort of worry. Gregory Boyd, for example, has argued that it is not the Fall of Adam and Eve that wreaks havoc on the creation, but the prehistoric Fall of Satan (Boyd 2001). This view is not susceptible to the worry about evolutionary evil pre-dating the cause of that evil. It might also escape the fragility objection because the natural evil that results from the Satanic Fall might be due, not to a built in fragility which fractures the integrity of nature when Satan falls but, rather, to specific acts of moral wrongdoing by Satan (for example, tinkering with the genome in ways that promotes suboptimal design).

A second, increasingly popular, explanation is that natural evil is not caused by moral evil, but can nonetheless be explained in a somewhat analogous way. On this view, creation itself, like the human beings it contains, has a “freedom to wander” which necessarily leaves open the possibility that it will wander in directions that involve natural evil.

This explanation falls short for at least three reasons. First, despite the label, non-conscious creation is not free at all, but rather, at best, contingent or unpredictable in its behavior. Second, even if the cosmos were free to wander, why did God allow it to contain as much evil as it does, persisting for so long? A universe created fully formed, in just the way hypothesized by so-called young earth creationists, could be equally free to wander. But it would not include the massive suffering that is, in fact, part of our current evolutionary heritage. Finally, even if we can resolve these two problems, we are still left with the problem that the good of a cosmos that is free to wander does not outweigh the resulting evil: all of the billions of organisms who suffer and die horribly. Is the good of a creation free to wander worth the price? It is hard to see how.

The third and final troublesome explanation we will consider here has been developed most vigorously by biologist Francisco Ayala (Ayala 2007; see also Avise (2010) and the reply by Schloss and Murray (2010)). Ayala claims that, rather than exacerbating the problem of evil, evolution solves the problem of evil since the burden of blame for that evil falls not on God but, rather, on the impersonal process of evolution itself. Ayala explains the view as follows: “A major burden was removed from the shoulders of believers when convincing evidence was advanced that the design of organisms need not be attributed to the immediate agency of the Creator, but rather is an outcome of natural processes” (Ayala 2007). On this view, God is relieved of responsibility, allowing theists to “acknowledge Darwin’s revolution and accept natural selection as the process that accounts for the design of organisms, as well as for the dysfunctions, oddities, cruelties, and sadism that pervade the world of life” (Ayala 2007: 160).

This explanation is unsatisfying for numerous reasons. First, it does not meet the condition set out earlier for a good explanation of evil, in other words, it does not show that evil is necessary to securing a greater good. What is the greater good? And why would permitting evolutionary evil be necessary to secure it? Second, this explanation merely transfers the problem up one level, for while God is not the direct cause of evil, God is still the remote cause, and thus no less responsible. We can see the problem clearly by considering an analogy. Wanting not to be responsible for driving drunk and getting in an accident where passengers are drunk, one might choose not to drive drunk. But it is no better to put one’s passengers in a car with a known inebriated chauffeur! On Ayala’s view, God has done just that with evolution. However, at least with the drunk chauffeur I am not certain that an accident will occur, whereas an omniscient God would be certain of the inevitability of evolutionary evil.

We now turn to consider three explanations for evolutionary evil that are better candidates for satisfying our standards: Neo-Cartesianism, Embodied Intentionality and Chaos-to-Order.

When considering the problem of animal pain, suffering, and death, one question that arises but is not often addressed is this: What is animal consciousness like, and how would we know? This is obviously an important question since what most fundamentally makes animal pain and suffering a bad thing is the conscious character of the mental states of pain and suffering. If animal consciousness has an entirely different qualitative character, the extent to which it is different might change the extent to which those states count as evil.

When we consider some of the current theories of the nature of consciousness in the philosophy of mind, they contain a range of possibilities, which, if true, would be relevant to our understanding of the moral significance of animal pain and suffering. On many of these views, animals are either non-conscious (because, for example, phenomenal consciousness requires exotic cognitive abilities such as “higher order thoughts”) or they are conscious but such consciousness lacks moral salience. How could that possibly be the case?

The answer is that we know that even human beings with phenomenally conscious pain states sometimes regard those states as not being unpleasant. In the 1930s and 40s patients with chronic pain were sometimes treated by surgical lobotomy. Afterwards, these patients would sometimes express relief, but not because the pain was gone. Rather, they would report that the pain was still there, and just as intense, but that they did not care about it anymore. More recent work in neuroscience shows that pain is mediated by two pathways: one that detects the injurious stimuli, and one, processed by the prefrontal cortex, that moderates the level at which we care about it (see Murray 2008).

Since almost all other animals lack a prefrontal cortex, one possibility that presents itself is this: animals have conscious pain states, but having them does not bother them. So we are left to wonder: is that what animal mental states are like when it comes to pain? And the answer is: we do not know. But if any of these proposals are correct, it would seem that animal pain and suffering is not a problem to be solved in the first place. And the problem of animal pain and suffering thus evaporates.

But let’s suppose that all of these theories are wrong. What alternatives would there be for explaining animal pain and suffering in the context of the evolutionary problem of evil? Some philosophers have argued that animal pain and suffering is justified because it is a necessary condition for a greater good that accrues to the animals themselves. On one proposal, animal pain and suffering permits animals to engage in morally significant or even heroic acts by putting themselves at risk. The mother who plays the decoy to protect its offspring from a predator does something of moral significance by putting itself at risk of suffering or death. However, such proposals seem, objectionably anthropomorphic. And there are additional liabilities. For example, mothers can play decoy and incur a risk of loss even without pain and suffering, since they can be at risk of losing their very lives.

There is, however, another way of developing theories along these lines. If animals act on intentions, if they *intend* to do things when they act, there must be some mechanism that allows them to balance the desire to achieve the intended end, with the risks that the intended acts pose to their bodily integrity. There is good reason to think that the only sort of tool that can provide the proper counter-balance is pain. We should be clear that we are not saying that in order for animals to avoid injury it is necessary that they be “wired up” with a system that alarms them to injury. There are all sorts of ways that animals could be wired to cause them to recoil from environmental dangers. What we are saying is that when animals act on intentions, they need a countervailing source of motivation that can deter them from pursuing those intentions, when those intentions also involve a risk to their bodily integrity.

Of course, one might still wonder why that countervailing motivation has to be *pain*. And, in fact, there are some answers to this question. Researchers seeking to treat subjects who have lost the ability to feel pain have tried a variety of ways to replace those lost sensations that indicate that their bodies are incurring physical harm. They tried a

variety of substitute mechanisms, but only pain would work—and that had to be pain that could not be overridden. In fact, when researchers set up patients with a pain sensor that caused them to feel a shock under their armpit when they gripped an object too tightly, the patients would simply disconnect the shock mechanism if they really wanted to accomplish the injury-causing task. Such research seems to indicate that pain is not just *one way* to keep intentional agents from injuring themselves, but it is either the only way or the most effective way. If that is the case, perhaps animals genuinely *need* pain for their own protection.

Evolutionary Progress or Purpose

The question of whether evolutionary history displays a trajectory that is progressive or in some sense suggestive of purpose is theologically salient for two reasons. First, it is widely acknowledged that Darwin's "great contribution was the final demolition of the idea that nature is the product of Intelligent Design" (Rachels 1990: 110; Dupre 2005). Interestingly, many early Darwinian theists did not reject evolution on this account, but came to see evidence of design in the very nature of the evolutionary process which, in the words of Darwin, "results in the perfection of all corporeal endowments," rather than in the characteristics of individual organisms which, prior to Darwin, seemed to require miraculous intervention. Early Darwinians adopted the view that evolution is a process by which God secures greater complexity and order in the biological world over time. Many argued that since natural selection is a process that winnows "unfit" organisms, evolution is thereby a providential instrument resulting in organisms that displayed increasing "perfection" over time. Indeed, many saw the creation of living things by means of the "natural law of variation and selection" as a testimony to the wisdom of the creator in much the way the machines used in industrial production testify to the wisdom of their designers. The popular nineteenth-century preacher Henry Ward Beecher noted, in an 1885 sermon, that while looking at an Oriental rug at a rug factory we might remark:

Well, that is a beautiful design, and these are skilful women that made it, there can be no question about that. But now behold the power-loom, where not simply a rug with long, drudging work by hand is being created, but where the machine is creating carpet in endless lengths . . . Now the question is this: Is it an evidence of design in these women that they turn out such work, and is it not evidence of a higher design in the man who turned out that machine . . . which could carry on this work a thousand-fold more magnificently than human fingers did?

(Beecher 1885: 116)

As Beecher summed up the underlying sentiment, "design by wholesale is grander than design by retail" (Beecher 1885: 115). Second, however, independent of and pre-dating either evolutionary accounts of origins or arguments for design, biblical theism has always seen God as working through history to achieve His purposes for humanity and the cosmos. Therefore, the question of whether history appears to be "headed somewhere" is theologically significant (Schloss 2008).

It turns out that this issue is also scientifically significant and has been a focus of debate on three fronts (Schloss 2007). First there is the issue of whether there are sus-

tained directional trends across evolutionary history. In one sense, the answer to this seems quite clear for a variety of traits: characteristics such as body size, sensory acuity, homeostatic precision, cellular differentiation, and parental investment all increase over evolutionary history. But these observations do not settle the question, because the trends do not hold across all lineages and, even within lineages, whether they involve averages or just maxima is still debated. To say maximum salary has increased is a very different statement than saying there is an increasing trend in median income. And perhaps most important with respect to “heading somewhere” is the question of whether there is a coherent theme underlying these increases or whether they merely represent an *à la carte* expansion of variability (that is, is evolution really heading somewhere, or just meandering everywhere?).

An unanticipated perspective on this question has been provided by recent descriptions of the major evolutionary transitions that have facilitated the origin and elaboration of the above and other biological capacities. These transitions involve a series of breakthrough innovations—eukaryotic cells, sexual reproduction, multicellularity, sociality—that share common themes: functional specialization and cooperative interdependence (Maynard Smith and Szathmáry 1998). Thus it does appear that there is a thematically consistent directionality to the series of transitions that have reformulated the scale and function of living organisms according to which formerly independent units evolve into dependent parts of a whole (Michod 2000).

A further issue arises, however, concerning whether such trends constitute what we might call “progress.” Strictly speaking, if progress involves something like change in a direction that is valued, then this is not a question that science can answer since the determination of value lies beyond its purview. But given a specified value, the question of whether that value is increasing over evolutionary history can presumably be answered empirically. Say one takes the fundamental qualities of life, such as self-regulation or the ability to sense and respond to the physical environment, to be valuable. Or say one takes as valuable the capacity to sense and respond to the needs of other organisms, including the formation of enduring attachments and even the capacity for sacrificial investment—the fundamentals of what our species experiences as love. Since these capacities both emerge and increase over phylogenetic history, evolution is surely progressive. However, this should not be conflated with *moral* progress, or even with a claim that the net balance of non-moral goodness is increasing. With the increase of these capacities also comes an increased capacity for both inflicting and experiencing suffering and, with the emergence of moral agents, for both moral goodness and evil. If there is a loving God whose purposes include the creation of beings capable of receiving and transmitting love, evolutionary history seems to entail an escalating series of organic innovations that are concordant with and necessary for—but not sufficient for—the attainment of such purpose.

A third question is whether this evolving progression is an inevitable or contingent and highly improbable outcome of the evolutionary process. While this is a hotly debated scientific question regarding the operation of selection and the structure of environmental constraints, it is often answered in ways that illegitimately fund explicit theological conclusions. Stephen Gould famously asserted that because we would not get humans or even the rise of mammals if the tapes of evolutionary history were to be replayed 1,000 times over, it makes no sense to believe that divine providence, working through evolutionary processes, had us in mind (Gould 1990, 1996). Many theists accept this statement and therefore reject evolution, or advocate a supposedly more providence-friendly teleological view of evolution (Conway Morris 2004). But there are three problems with

this assertion of incompatibility between evolutionary contingency and providence. The first is that in light of work on the major evolutionary transitions, natural selection under laboratory conditions, and convergence in fossil and living organisms, evolutionary history is recognized as entailing a more complicated interplay of contingency and necessity than the radical contingency view entails. Setting aside debates over whether the trajectory we see was inevitable, it is not at all clear that it was massively improbable. Second, even if the present outcome of the evolutionary process on earth were inevitable, this is by no means necessary for, or even amenable to, providence (other than the weak providence of Deism). Third, even if the outcome of evolution were contingent on chance events as Gould and some others assert, the inference about providence does not follow. For one thing, if the rise of mammals required an asteroid collision or some other cataclysm (and this no longer appears to be the case), to say that it would not happen again were the tapes replayed, conflates the unpredictable with the improbable. The fact is, given the initial conditions of the cosmos and the causal regularities that govern it, we do not know what the actual likelihood was of earth being struck by an asteroid (although we do know that this was not a singular event and has happened multiple times in earth's history); neither do we know the likelihood of mammalian fauna having arisen in the wake of some other cataclysm at a different point in history. For another thing, it erroneously equates the contingent with the divinely unanticipated and unintended. That is, even if an event that is necessary for a particular outcome appears to be highly improbable, this does not mean that an omniscient God could not know it would happen, or an omnipotent God could not guarantee it would happen.

Thus the theologically significant question of whether evolutionary history appears to be headed anywhere is scientifically tractable and the answer appears to be yes. The question of whether the directionality we observe is inevitable, likely, or massively improbable is fraught with unresolved theoretical and metaphysical questions; but it is a theological red-herring.

Related Topics

Chapter 14: Naturalism; Chapter 16: Natural Sciences; Chapter 26: Cognitive Science; Chapter 28: Arguments from Evil; Chapter 40: Animals

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Recommended Reading

- Alexander, D. (2008) *Creation or Evolution: Do We Have to Choose?*, Oxford: Lion Hudson. A thoughtful, popular-level presentation of the evidence for evolution and a very balanced assessment of its implications for all the issues raised in this article.
- Bowler, P. J. (2008) *Monkey Trials and Gorilla Sermons: Evolution and Christianity from Darwin to Intelligent Design*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. A brief, though expansive, historical overview of creation/evolution interactions.
- de Waal, F. (author), S. Macedo and J. Ober (eds), (2009) *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved*, Princeton: Princeton University Press. A presentation of one evolutionary account of morality that emphasizes continuity with non-human species; followed up by fair-minded but substantial critiques from philosophers Peter Singer, Christine M. Korsgaard, and Philip Kitcher.
- Dembski, W. and M. Ruse (eds), (2007) *Debating Design: From Darwin to DNA*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. The only volume that is edited by, and contains contributions from, both critics and advocates of current design arguments in biology.
- Dupre, J. (2005) *Darwin’s Legacy: What Evolution Means Today*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. An overview of the reasons for claiming that evolution makes God not only an unnecessary hypothesis but also an untenable one.
- McMullin, E. (ed.), (1986) *Evolution and Creation*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press. One of the first and still one of the most wide-ranging, even-handed and philosophically astute theological assessments of the modern synthetic theory of evolution, including topics such as purpose and teleology, original sin, divine action, and the evolutionary origins of morality and religion.
- Ruse, M. and J. Travis (eds), (2009) *Evolution: The First Four Billion Years*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University (Belknap) Press. A compendium of 100 essays and encyclopedia entries on the scientific and philosophical content of debates across the history of evolutionary thought.
- Russell, J. R., F. J. Ayala and W. R. Stoeger (eds), (1999) *Evolutionary and Molecular Biology: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press. An interdisciplinary volume with 22 contributions from scientists, philosophers and theologians; focusing on both biological and philosophical aspects of evolutionary theory and providence.

PHYSICAL COSMOLOGY

Hans Halvorson and Helge Kragh

Christianity and other monotheistic religions (Islam and Judaism) assume a transcendent and sovereign God who created the universe and continually maintains its existence. The world only exists because of an ultimate and supernatural cause which is, as Newton said, “not blind and fortuitous, but very well skilled in Mechanics and Geometry” (Cohen 1978: 282). Whether in a general philosophical sense or in a scientific sense, cosmology has always been part of theism, but it is only relatively recently that cosmology based on physics and astronomy has entered the discussion concerning the existence and role of God. A limited application of physics to the study of the universe can be found in the second half of the nineteenth century when the cosmological consequences of the law of entropy increase were eagerly discussed in relation to the Christian doctrines of a world with a beginning and end in time. However, physical cosmology is essentially a twentieth-century science which emerged as a result of the discovery in about 1930 that the universe is in a state of expansion that possibly started a finite time ago. Cosmology as a subdiscipline of physics differs in some respects from mathematical, philosophical and classical observational cosmology, but of course the different approaches are in constant interaction. In a modern sense, physical cosmology became established after the discovery of the cosmic microwave background in 1965 which quickly turned the hot big-bang model into the standard model of the universe. Jim Peebles’ *Physical Cosmology* of 1971, possibly the first book with this title, may be taken as the beginning of modern physical cosmology.

Although physical cosmology based on general relativity theory and elementary particle physics is thus a modern science, many of the theologically relevant questions related to current cosmology are old. Has the universe come into existence a finite time ago? Will it come to an end? Why are the cosmic evolution and the laws of nature of just such a kind that they permit intelligent life to exist? These and other questions of obvious relevance to theism are currently being discussed in the light of the most recent cosmological theories and observations, but the questions themselves (and, indeed, many of the answers) were familiar to medieval philosophers and theologians. This is also the case with the question that is sometimes considered the ultimate one: Why is there a cosmos? There is no reason to expect that today’s advanced physical cosmology, or the even more advanced cosmology of tomorrow, will provide final answers that satisfy theists and atheists alike.

Creation and the Big Bang

Einstein’s general theory of relativity shows that the structure of spacetime is itself a dynamical variable, subject to causal influence by the material constituents of the

universe. Indeed, Einstein immediately saw the potential to apply general relativity to large-scale cosmological questions. The first cosmological model of Einstein (1917) described a static universe, that is, one whose spatial geometry is constant over time. Such a model was not consistent with the original field equations; thus Einstein modified the equations by the addition of a cosmological constant: Λ . Although Einstein later said that the introduction of the cosmological constant was his greatest blunder, in recent years there have emerged independent reasons for introducing it into the equations.

Be that as it may, Einstein's static universe was empirically inadequate: it cannot account for the redshift data gathered by Edwin Hubble and others in the 1920s. The redshift data indicates that distant stars are moving away from us, and moving faster in direct proportion to their distance. Thus, the data indicate an expanding universe.

In the 1920s and 1930s, a number of cosmological models of general relativity were proposed that predict the expansion of the universe. The most accurate account of the data is given by the family of Friedmann–Robertson–Walker (FRW) models. The key characteristic of these models is that space is *homogeneous*, and hence isotropic (in other words, it looks the same in all directions). From the homogeneity assumption, it follows that the entire 4-dimensional spacetime divides neatly into a stack of 3-dimensional “spaces” each of which has constant curvature. The three possibilities for this curvature correspond to the three classical geometries: Euclidean (flat), spherical (positive), or hyperbolic (negative). In a given FRW spacetime, the geometry of space at one time is merely a rescaling of the geometry at any other time. Thus, a coordinate t (“time”) can index the stack of spaces, and if $h(t)$ is the metric of space at one time, then there is a scale factor S such that $h(t') = S(t')h(t)$ for all other times t' . The behavior of this scale factor S thus encodes the dynamics of an FRW universe.

In those FRW spacetimes that can reasonably be thought to model our cosmos (for example, those with massive objects), the time parameter t has an absolute lower bound t_0 . In particular, as t decreases towards t_0 , the scale parameter $S(t)$ goes to zero. What happens when t reaches t_0 ? In short, these models cannot say what happens, because there are no points of spacetime with time coordinate t_0 . That is, t_0 is an ideal point that is never reached: the universe exists at times after t_0 , but not before or at time t_0 .

The FRW spacetimes are extremely accurate descriptions of the large-scale structure of our universe. Since these models describe a universe with a *finite lifetime*, it is reasonable to conclude that the universe is not eternally old.

But many physicists and philosophers hesitate to draw this conclusion. In fact, the standard view in the 1950s and early 1960s was that the singularities of the FRW models were consequences of false idealizing assumptions, namely assumptions of perfect isotropy and homogeneity. But this escape route from singularities was definitely closed when Robert Geroch, Stephen Hawking, and Roger Penrose proved the “singularity theorems,” according to which *almost all* spacetimes are singular, and in particular, almost all cosmological models describe a finitely old universe.

A number of theists take the past-singular nature of cosmological models as confirmation of the claim that God created the universe *ex nihilo*. The list of advocates of this “big-bang theology” includes Pope Pius XII, Francis Collins (director, US National Institutes of Health), and apologists William Lane Craig and Hugh Ross. And indeed, big-bang cosmology does provide *prima facie* support for theism. After all, big-bang cosmology says that the universe has a finite age, and (traditional) theism says that God created the universe out of nothing. Does big-bang cosmology not confirm traditional theism? We give several reasons to be cautious about such claims.

Advocates of big-bang theology are most interested in the claim that the universe is finitely old. Thus, the chain of inferential support should run as follows:

Big-Bang Model \rightarrow *supports* \rightarrow Universe Finitely Old \rightarrow *supports* \rightarrow Theism.

Before discussing the first supposed inferential relation, we note that not all theists are committed to the claim that the universe is finitely old. For example, Aquinas claims (in several places, including the *Summa Theologica*) that Reason cannot demonstrate the finitude of the universe. But Aquinas also thinks that Reason can demonstrate the existence of God; therefore Aquinas does not think that the very concept of God as creator implies that the universe is finitely old. (Contrary to some contemporary theologians, though, Aquinas claims that a Christian theist should *believe* that the universe is finitely old. For Aquinas, the finite age of the universe is a revealed doctrine, like the divinity of Christ.) Contemporary theologians Arthur Peacocke and Ian Barbour also claim that the doctrine of the “creation” of the universe is best interpreted as one of the universe’s timeless dependence on God, and that such dependence does not demand a temporal creation event. For the remainder of this chapter, we will not discuss further the question of whether theism requires, or strongly supports, the claim that the universe is finitely old (arguments for this claim are assessed in Copan and Craig 2004). For now we focus on versions of theism that are committed—in a perhaps naive way—to creation ex nihilo. Even on this understanding of theism, there are still reasons to exercise caution in seeing the big bang as confirming the supposition that God created the universe.

1. If the current big-bang model provides confirmation for theism, then this means that theism makes the big-bang model likely. (This claim follows from standard probabilistic reasoning, in particular Bayes’ theorem.) Let’s be more precise. We are considering a version of theism according to which God created the universe out of nothing, in particular entailing a finite age for the universe. The big-bang model says that the universe is about 13 billion years old. Should the theist have expected that? It is difficult to answer that question. Many theists in the Judeo-Christian tradition expect a much smaller number, something on the order of several thousand years (see Byl 2001; Kelly 2000). But if a theist allows that God created the universe billions of years ago, then why expect 13 billion as opposed to 26 billion or even 99^{10} billion years? Indeed, if all finite values have equal probability (conditional on theism), then they all have probability zero. (Indeed, there are obvious problems with attempting to falsify a hypothesis that some parameter—such as the age of the universe—has a finite, but otherwise arbitrary, value.)

The reasoning in the previous paragraph leads, however, to an optimistic conclusion for the theist. In particular, suppose that it were shown that the universe *did* exist before the big bang. Would such a discovery undermine theism? Not in the slightest. For one, God might have created the universe ten minutes before the big bang. Or the current big bang might have been a big bounce; but the universe might have been created ex nihilo previous to the big bounce. The point is that insofar as the failure of the big-bang model would not undermine theism, so the success of the big-bang model does not support theism.

2. Even more extremely, suppose that the big-bang model were disconfirmed in favor of some model that posits a universe without beginning (for instance the steady-state

model, see next section). Surely the success of such a theory would yield a direct contradiction with the doctrine of creation ex nihilo! But not so fast: science employs numerous idealizations, and one of its favorite idealizations is to replace a large finite value with an infinite value. For example, in explaining phase transitions, it is routine to assume (contrary to fact) that one is dealing with a system that is infinitely extended. So, might not the best model be one with an infinitely old universe, even though the age of the actual system is just some huge finite number?

Even more strongly, creation ex nihilo is supposed to be miraculous—something for which the standard laws of nature cannot give an account. But then why should a theist expect to be able to derive creation ex nihilo from our best scientific theory? Compare creation ex nihilo with other supposed miracles, for example, the Christian claim that Jesus changed water into wine. Do Christian theists claim that chemistry should predict that water can transform into wine? Of course not: God is supposed to be able to transcend the laws of nature, and the laws of nature are no guide as to what did in fact happen. But then it would not seem crazy to suppose that the best (most explanatory, most elegant) cosmological theory would posit an infinite past, whereas in reality God got things started a finite amount of time ago.

3. Suppose, however, that the theist takes a harder line and says that theism requires (or suggests) cosmological models with a bounded time parameter. So, the time parameter should have no values lower than some number which we can set to zero.

But the interval $(0, t)$ is topologically isomorphic to $(-\infty, t)$; in other words, there is a translation scheme that takes a bounded interval to an unbounded interval. This isomorphism has been exploited more than once: first by E. A. Milne in 1935, and then independently by Charles Misner in 1969. In particular, Misner replaces the time parameter t with the negative of its logarithm (that is, $-\log t$) in order to assuage worries that a bounded time parameter makes no sense. According to Misner, even in models that begin with singularities, “the Universe is meaningfully infinitely old because infinitely many things have happened since the beginning.” Interestingly, Misner’s move can hardly be motivated by a desire to obviate the need for a creator of the universe: Misner is Catholic.

The conventionality of the temporal metric is noted by the Catholic philosopher of science Ernan McMullin, who concludes that the theological doctrine of creation ex nihilo should not be interpreted metrically (McMullin 1981). Rather, claims McMullin, the ex nihilo doctrine should be interpreted order-theoretically: the time series has a first point. Unfortunately, this order-theoretic criterion does not match our intuitions. On the one hand, FRW models *fail* the order-theoretic criterion: they have no first moment of time. On the other hand, an ideal first moment of time could be adjoined to *any* spacetime, even those that have a metrically infinite past (see Earman 1995). Thus, a simple order-theoretic criterion cannot account for the theological significance of cosmological models.

A more adequate criterion of when a cosmological model is consonant with creation ex nihilo would require a detailed analysis of spacetime singularities (for extensive discussion of the latter topic, see Earman 1995). The best current account of when a spacetime is truly singular (as opposed to merely being described with inadequate coordinates) is given by the notion of having inextendible geodesics. Thus, the big-bang theologian would do best to claim that creation ex nihilo is confirmed precisely by those cosmological spacetimes that have a past-inextendible geodesic. (Indeed, this

criterion does hold for FRW models.) The main problem with such a proposal is that it ties a robust, intuitive theological doctrine down to an extremely precise technical feature of Lorentzian manifolds (as described by differential geometry). The risk then is that by doing so, we add extraneous content to the doctrine: a future model might fail the technical criterion while still being consistent with the theological doctrine. Furthermore, many Christian theists claim that core theological doctrines are perspicuous—in particular, not understood exclusively by an elite class of priests or scholars. But the notion of a Lorentzian manifold having incomplete geodesics can hardly be said to be accessible to the average layperson.

4. Big-bang theology overreaches if it says that general relativity and the singularity theorems have settled once and for all that the universe had a beginning in time. In fact, relativistic cosmology predicts its own invalidity for times close to a dynamic singularity, such as the big bang (but for a dissenting opinion, see Misner (1969)). The reason that relativistic cosmology predicts its own invalidity is that in the neighborhood of singularities, gravitational effects are intense, and quantum effects can be expected to play a predominant role. But general relativity does not incorporate quantum effects, and indeed it is untested in such regimes of intense gravitational force. Thus, there is little reason to believe that the singularity theorems make a valid prediction about the structure of a future successor theory of general relativity that includes quantum effects. We discuss this issue further in the fourth section of this chapter.

5. As we have seen, many people have found big-bang cosmology congenial to a theistic world view. Typically, atheists and agnostics have merely attempted to defeat claims that big-bang cosmology requires belief in a creator. But there is a vocal minority—we might call them “big-bang atheologians”—who make the much stronger claim that big-bang cosmology undermines theism. The most notable proponents of this big-bang atheology are the philosophers Adolf Grünbaum and Quentin Smith. In the case of Smith, quantum cosmologies (see fourth section) are also taken to provide evidence against theism.

In putting forward their arguments, Grünbaum and Smith make a number of points that seem to have been overlooked by those who invoke the big bang to support theism. One such point is that our best cosmological models have no first state. Thus, a theist who invokes the big bang cannot say that there is a state of the universe, say α , such that God created the universe in state α . He or she will have to invoke a more sophisticated notion of God creating initial temporal intervals, or something like that.

Big-bang atheologians also argue that it makes no sense to accept both that there were no times before the big bang (since time itself comes into existence with the universe) and that the universe was caused. Of course, many theists claim that God causes the universe timelessly, and they would attempt to defend the coherence of such a notion in the face of these criticisms.

Steady State Theory

Conceptually founded on the “perfect cosmological principle”—the postulate that the universe in its large-scale features is not only spatially but also temporally homogeneous—the steady-state theory was introduced in 1948 by Fred Hoyle, Hermann Bondi and Thomas Gold. Although the classical steady-state theory was abandoned in the

1960s because of its inability to account for new discoveries (such as the cosmic microwave background and the redshifts of quasars), it remains an instructive case in the cosmology-theology discussion. Moreover, the theory is not quite dead yet, as some of its characteristic features survive in the quasi-steady-state cosmology (QSSC) that is still defended by Jayant Narlikar and a few other cosmologists. This model does not satisfy the perfect cosmological principle, but it assumes an indefinite cosmic time scale during which matter is continually created. In this respect it is an alternative to the big-bang theory and its supposed association with divine creation. In 1994, at a time when he was developing the QSSC model, Hoyle referred to big-bang cosmology as “a form of religious fundamentalism” (Hoyle 1994: 413). According to the classical steady-state theory, the universe has expanded for an infinity of time and will continue to do so for ever; yet the average density of matter remains constant because matter, or rather matter-energy, is continually being created out of nothing. (In later versions of the theory, matter creation was not *ex nihilo*.) Both features—the infinite time scale and the continuous creation of matter—were controversial and caused concerns of a philosophical and also a theological nature.

It was widely assumed in the 1950s that the steady-state universe was contrary to theism or at least made God superfluous as a creator of the cosmos. After all, how can God have created a universe which has existed in an infinity of time? The argument might seem to pose a real problem for theism, but the theologians were well prepared—it had been discussed since the thirteenth century when Thomas Aquinas suggested that God could indeed have created an infinitely old universe. Moreover, theological responses to an infinitely old universe were far from new, for they had already been developed in relation to eternally cyclic models, either in the more speculative versions of the nineteenth century or the relativistic models that were proposed in the 1930s onwards.

According to the Thomistic doctrine of *creatio continuans*, God causes things to exist in the sense that their existence depends wholly on his power. If they were left to themselves they would turn into, or return into, nothingness. From this point of view creation is basically a metaphysical rather than a physical and temporal concept, and an eternal yet created universe is perfectly possible. As theologians in the 1950s were quick to point out, Hoyle’s eternal universe was not particularly heretical, for it was still in need of a creator. Not only did they mobilize the old concept of continual divine creation, emphasizing that cosmic creation is primarily about the ontological dependence of the world on God, they also stressed that faith in God has little to do with physical cosmology in whichever of its versions. Erich Mascall, a priest and philosopher of religion, saw no reason why the steady-state model should cause worry among the faithful. As he said in 1956: “The whole question whether the world had a beginning or not is, in the last resort, profoundly unimportant for theology” (Mascall 1956: 155).

Views similar to Mascall’s have been held by many later theologians and Christian philosophers, but not by all. There is disagreement about how solidly based in the Bible the concept of atemporal continual creation is, and also about the significance of an absolute beginning of the world. The view that cosmology is essentially irrelevant to Christian belief has not gone uncontested. As Ernan McMullin has pointed out, Christian doctrines are more than metaphysics and codes for moral conduct; they are also cosmic claims that say something about the universe and what it contains. For this reason theologians need to pay attention to cosmology in particular and to science in general.

Some Christian scientists and philosophers have seen the continual creation of matter, as posited by the steady-state theory, as a manifestation of perpetual divine creation.

Thus, the Catholic philosopher Philip Quinn has adopted the old notion of *creatio continuans* to the case of steady-state cosmology. The argument is essentially that since ex nihilo creation of matter violates energy conservation, there must be an external creative cause that accounts for the violation, and this cause he identifies with perpetual divine creation. This kind of reasoning has been severely criticized by Adolf Grünbaum, who flatly dismisses the claim that underlies the idea of perpetual divine creation, which is that nothingness is the natural state of the universe. According to Grünbaum there is no room for divine creation in either big-bang or steady-state cosmology. “Steady-state cosmology,” he concludes, “is indeed *logically incompatible* with [the] claim that divine creative intervention is causally necessary for the nonconservative popping into existence of new matter in the steady-state universe” (Grünbaum 1996: 529).

Quantum and String Cosmologies

As we mentioned previously, there are reasons to suspect the invalidity of classical general relativity in regimes near a singularity—most importantly, for times very close to the big bang. In particular, when lengths are very small, and curvature and temperatures are very high, then—if the gravitational force behaves like all other known forces of nature—quantum effects will take over, and we should accordingly expect different outcomes. This observation is itself sufficient to utterly destroy the aspirations of big-bang theology—unless there are good reasons to think that the finite-age prediction of relativistic cosmology will be preserved by a theory of quantum gravity or in string theory. In this section, we briefly review the known data about singularities in theories that attempt to unify gravity and quantum mechanics. Our review supports two conclusions: (1) We do not know yet if the best model will predict a finitely old universe, but (2) there are good reasons to think that the big bang is not necessarily an absolute beginning.

There have been a number of proposed theories of quantum cosmology. Perhaps best known of these is the proposal of Stephen Hawking, which results in a universe with no boundary—motivating the famous question, “What place, then, for a creator?” The bearing of Hawking’s cosmology on theism has already been discussed extensively by Craig and Smith (1995). As noted by Drees (1990), Hawking’s approach is just one among several competing attempts to incorporate quantum effects into relativistic cosmology, and we are not compelled to accept its idiosyncratic metaphysical picture. More to the point, Hawking’s cosmological model is *ad hoc* in the sense that it does not flow from a more comprehensive unification of quantum theory and gravity. In this section we turn to two cosmological theories that do result from systematic and comprehensive unifications of general relativity and quantum theory: loop quantum cosmology and string cosmology.

Loop quantum cosmology (LQC) is an approach to cosmology within the framework of the loop quantum gravity (LQG) program (Rovelli 2004), which itself starts with the idea that unifying quantum theory and general relativity will require “quantizing” the gravitational field—and hence the structures of spacetime itself. Roughly speaking, to quantize a theory means that the quantities (position, momentum, scalar curvature, and so on) are replaced by “matrices,” or more generally with “operators on a Hilbert space.” This replacement can have profound physical consequences, most particularly the spectrum of a quantity (that is, the numerical values it can possess) can become discretized where it was previously continuous, or bounded where it was previously unbounded, and quantities can be forced to obey a Heisenberg uncertainty principle.

For our purposes, the important question is what happens to those quantities (such as spatial curvature) that grow unboundedly large in classical FRW spacetimes as time t approaches the initial singularity t_0 ? To answer this question requires going through intricate technicalities involving domains of definition of operators, and so on. To summarize, however, the most prominent proposal (championed primarily by Martin Bojowald and collaborators) results in a scale parameter $S(t)$ that is bounded away from zero, entailing that curvature is *bounded from above*. More is true: the spacetime of LQC extends through the big bang, in other words, the universe existed *before* the big bang.

The jury is still out on whether LQC is our best cosmological theory. Nonetheless, LQC could very well be correct; that is, there is a non-negligible probability that LQC is true. Thus, there is a non-negligible probability that the big bang is not the beginning of the universe, and *a fortiori*, not the creation event (even if there was one).

However, LQG is not the most popular (in terms of sheer number of researchers) approach to unifying quantum theory and gravity. The title of “most popular” belongs to string theory, and so string theory’s take on the big bang is of crucial interest for those wishing to assess the bearing of physical cosmology on traditional theistic doctrines.

All indications from string cosmology point to the fact that the universe existed before the big bang. In particular, string theory claims that if we apply fundamental symmetry transformations to cosmological models of the recent universe, then we get a copy of the universe (with important quantities inverted) that might be called the “pre-big-bang universe.” In this scenario, the big bang disappears and is replaced by a saddle point in the dynamical evolution of spacetime curvature: before this point, curvature is increasing, and after this point, it is decreasing.

According to Gasperini (2008), string cosmology’s prediction of a pre-big-bang universe results from a principled application of symmetry principles. Furthermore, string theory has a built-in mechanism (namely a minimum string length) that seems to rule out singularities of infinite curvature or spatial length shrinking to zero. As was the case in LQC, the values of physical quantities in string theory are constrained by quantum mechanical laws; and so some quantities that grew beyond bounds in classical theory are well-behaved in quantized versions of that theory.

We currently lack the empirical data that would choose between competing models of quantum cosmology. But these models are empirically inequivalent—and are also inequivalent to classical relativistic cosmology. To the extent that these models can be tested, it is an empirical question whether the big bang was the beginning of the universe.

The Multiverse and Other Non-standard Cosmologies

There are several alternatives to the standard hot big-bang picture of the universe starting in $t = 0$, with or without inflation. Eternally cyclic models in which the contracting phase changes into an expanding one without passing through a singular state were already proposed by some cosmologists in the second half of the nineteenth century. Such models, in which there is no definite beginning of the universe, are traditionally seen as contrary to theism. While classical cyclic models presupposing a closed universe do not agree with current observations, the twenty-first century has witnessed two new proposals: “conformal cyclic cosmology” developed by Roger Penrose, and the “new cyclic cosmology” developed by Paul Steinhardt and Neil Turok.

Penrose develops his cyclic cosmology by applying insights from general relativity to another longstanding puzzle of physics, namely the second law of thermodynamics.

The second law of thermodynamics states that the entropy of a closed system never decreases. But this is puzzling, because the radiation content (cosmic microwave background) of the early universe appears to be highly disordered, whereas the current universe is somewhat ordered. Penrose's solution to this problem is to suppose that *gravitational* entropy was much lower in the early universe. As he puts it, "almost all of those [gravitational] degrees of freedom were somehow not activated" (Penrose 2006: 2759).

In conformal cyclic cosmology, Penrose claims that as the big bang is approached, massive objects play a negligible role, so that the physics is governed by degrees of freedom that are invariant under rescaling of lengths and times. Such degrees of freedom are called "conformal invariants." Thus, Penrose claims, we make a mistake to model the early universe by a Lorentzian manifold with a metric (as is done in classical general relativity). Rather, spacetime should be described by a *conformal manifold*, which is essentially a conformal equivalence class of general relativistic spacetimes.

The "cyclic" part of Penrose's cosmology comes from noticing that the future of one ever-expanding universe can be smoothly bridged to the past of another big-bang universe by means of such a conformal manifold. In this case, the big bang is not a true beginning, but only a sort of phase change from one "epoch" to another.

The new cyclic cosmology of Steinhardt and Turok develops ideas from string theory to describe a universe going through an endless sequence of cycles—in which case, the big bang is not the beginning of time. Although the Steinhardt-Turok model has attracted a fair amount of attention, it is not widely accepted. Nor is this the case with the pre-big-bang bouncing cosmology argued by Gabriele Veneziano and Maurizio Gasperini on the basis of string theory. (A classical version of the bouncing universe was proposed by George Gamow in 1954.) According to the pre-big-bang model the universe is not only eternal into the future, it is also eternal into the past, the two cosmic phases (contracting and expanding) being separated by a non-singular big bang. Since neither of the two models operate with an absolute beginning, they might seem to be problematic from a theistic point of view. However, the theist can always appeal to perpetual divine creation, just as in the case of the steady-state universe.

The modern idea of the multiverse is theologically more controversial. In its so-called landscape version, which since 2002 has been promoted and developed by Leonard Susskind and many other physicists, it is based on the apparent non-uniqueness of the equations of string theory. The solutions of the equations describe, in a sense, possible worlds with different physical parameters, interactions, types of particles, and even dimensionality; the multitude of solutions are then identified with really existing worlds which generally are causally separate from ours. As a mechanism for generating the huge number of universes, multiverse physicists make use of the eternal inflation scenario. Moreover, the multiverse is closely associated with anthropic reasoning: we find ourselves in our universe, with its particular physical laws and content of particles, not because other universes are impossible or improbable, but because our kind of life cannot exist in other universes. The theory of the multiverse has seductively great explanatory power (while it has almost no predictive power), which is a major reason why many physicists and cosmologists find it attractive. On the other hand, other physicists dismiss it as pseudoscience because it is practically untestable.

It is common among supporters of the multiverse to conceive it as an alternative to a divinely created world and ideas of natural theology. Because it represents our universe as a chance universe, special only by the fact that we live in it, the multiverse has been

likened to another and more famous anti-design theory, neo-Darwinianism. Steven Weinberg puts it as follows:

Just as Darwin and Wallace explained how the wonderful adaption of living forms could arise without supernatural intervention, so the string landscape may explain how the constants of nature that we observe can take values suitable for life without being fine-tuned by a benevolent creator.

(Weinberg 2007: 39)

At least to some theists, the multiverse stands in sharp contrast to Christian belief. As Richard Swinburne sees it: "To postulate a trillion trillion other universes, rather than one God in order to explain the orderliness of our universe, seems the height of irrationality" (Swinburne 1996: 68). On the other hand, there is no one-to-one correspondence between views on the multiverse and belief in a divine creator. It is possible to answer affirmatively to the question, "Does God love the multiverse?" such as the physicist Don Page did at a symposium in 2008 (see Page 2008). Even if there are 10^{500} universes (but not, perhaps, if there are an infinite number of them), they could have been providentially created by the almighty God with a purpose we cannot fathom. Why not? It has even been suggested that multiverse explanations are reminiscent of divine explanations and unintentionally reintroduce a transcendent creator.

The anthropic principle, an integral part of multiverse cosmology, has similarly been discussed in theological contexts and, again similarly, without any consensus emerging from the many discussions. In its most common version, called the weak anthropic principle, it states that what we observe is selected by our existence in a universe with just such properties that allow us to exist. Swinburne and some other theists in favor of design arguments find the anthropic principle to be, at best, unnecessary and obfuscating. To them, the values of the cosmic parameters and constants of nature appear to be fine-tuned because they *are* fine-tuned, the designer being God. The atheist Richard Dawkins goes further, arguing that the anthropic principle is an alternative to the design hypothesis and provides strong evidence for a world without God. However, theists do not generally see anthropically based arguments as a problem for a divinely created world. William Lane Craig and John Polkinghorne are among those who hold that the anthropic principle is compatible with divine design and can even be seen as indirect support for theism.

In relation to the design argument, as reinvigorated by the discussions of the anthropic principle, some physicists and philosophers have returned to an old objection to it, namely that it is not an argument for the Christian God; it is, at best, an argument for a cosmic architect in a deistic sense or, for that matter, several such architects. On the other hand, theists have replied that even if this objection be true it does not constitute a proof that the God of theism does not exist. Although design arguments frequently occur in connection with the anthropic principle, it needs to be said that they were not part of the original anthropic program initiated by Brandon Carter in 1974.

Infinity and the Universe

Although the universe is generally believed to be temporally finite in the past, it could well be spatially and materially infinite. If space is infinite and the cosmological principle is assumed to be valid, the universe will contain an infinite number of galaxies, stars,

atoms and everything else. On the one hand, such actual infinities not only cause philosophical and logical problems, they could also cause problems of a theological nature. These are not specifically related to modern physical cosmology but have been discussed since the early days of Christianity. On the other hand, they might be seen as even more relevant today, when the favored cosmological model has zero curvature, meaning that space is flat. Although a flat cosmic space does not necessarily imply an infinite universe, many cosmologists assume that the universe is indeed spatially infinite.

The theological implications of an infinite universe were discussed by the church fathers and, in greater detail, by Johannes Philoponus in the sixth century. Many of the arguments were of the same kind as those used in the attempts to prove the impossibility of a temporal infinity. At the time of the scientific revolution it was commonly assumed that physical space cannot be truly infinite, only indefinitely large. Infinity was seen as a divine attribute not to be found elsewhere; to claim that nature is infinite would be to endow it with divinity, a heretical view characteristic of pantheism. While the generally accepted view among theists was, and to some extent still is, that an infinite universe is philosophically absurd and theologically heretical, there was no consensus on the issue. In fact, several Christian scientists, from Descartes in the seventeenth century to Edward Milne in the twentieth, have argued that an infinite universe is in better agreement with God's will and omnipotence than a finite one. The correlation between finitism and theism, and infinitism and atheism, should be seen as historically contingent rather than justified by either scientific or theological reasons.

During the early period of modern cosmology, relativistic models with zero or negative curvature were sometimes associated with materialism and atheism because they implied a universe of infinite size. Conversely, Einstein's closed and finite universe was welcomed by theists. According to Ernest W. Barnes, the mathematically trained bishop of Birmingham, infinite space was "a scandal to human thought" (Barnes 1931: 598). His argument was epistemic as well as theological: only if God's universe is finite can we hope to understand the full range of his activity. His contemporary, the Catholic priest and pioneer cosmologist Georges Lemaître, thought likewise that the universe had to be finite in order to be comprehensible. In agreement with his later warning against the "nightmare of infinite space," both of his two innovative cosmological models, the expanding model of 1927 and the big-bang model of 1931, were spatially closed. The steady-state model of the 1950s was not only unpopular among Christians because of its lack of a cosmic creation, but also because it implied a homogeneous universe of infinite extent. According to Stanley Jaki, a Benedictine priest and historian of science, the infinite universe is a scientific cover-up for atheism (Jaki 1988).

The present consensus model of a geometrically flat accelerating universe is usually taken to imply an infinite cosmos. The general attitude of cosmologists is to ignore the troublesome philosophical problems and speak of the infinite universe as just an indefinitely large one. They rarely reflect on the weird epistemic consequences of an actual infinity and even more rarely on the theological consequences. The South-African cosmologist George Ellis is an exception to the rule. He and his collaborators have argued forcefully against an infinite universe, suggesting that the flat space of the consensus model is probably an abstraction that does not hold physically. If the universe is really infinite and uniform it can be (and has been) argued that there will be an infinity of identical copies of all human beings and indeed of everything. Such a consequence, as discussed by Ellis, Max Tegmark, Alan Guth and others, clearly is theologically disturbing. Even more disturbing, says Ellis, is that God might then not be able to keep track of,

and give attention to, the infinite number of beings in the universe. Moreover, if there is a multitude of cosmic regions, each of which is inhabited with intelligent beings, one might need to contemplate a multitude of Christ-figures, incarnations and crucifixions. Ellis was not only willing to consider such a scenario, he also thought that it strengthened the case for a finite universe: "Surely an infinite number of Christ-figures must be too much, no matter how one envisages God" (Ellis 1993: 394).

The End of the World

The cosmological field equations are time-symmetric and the fundamental laws of physics are assumedly valid at any time. Thus, modern cosmology is not only about the past of the universe, it also offers scenarios about its far future, including speculations about the fate of intelligent life. Given that the apocalyptic passages in the Bible speak of an end of the world and a possible new creation, the cosmic future might seem to offer another point of contact between cosmology and theistic religion. Scientifically based speculations about the state of the cosmos in the far future and the possibility of endless life were first discussed in the late nineteenth century in connection with the controversy over the heat death predicted by the second law of thermodynamics. Some of the German scientists involved in the controversy argued that life might persist even in the very high-entropic environment of the far future, and they explicitly referred to the eschatological aspects of cosmology. Characteristically, while the heat death scenario was welcomed by Christian authors, it was vehemently opposed by materialists and atheists who argued for an eternal universe with eternal life. As Eddington, an advocate of the inevitable heat death, later asked: "Since when has the teaching that 'heaven and earth shall pass away' become ecclesiastically un-orthodox?" (Eddington 1935: 59).

Since the 1970s "physical eschatology" has emerged as a new subfield of astrophysics and cosmology, pioneered by Freeman Dyson, Jamal Islam and others. The field deals primarily with the state of the universe in the remote future as based on extrapolations of cosmological models and the assumption that the presently known laws of physics will remain indefinitely valid. The favored scenario is the open, ever-expanding universe where extrapolations typically result in an ultimate future (at about 10^{100} years from now!) in which the universe consists of nothing but an exceedingly thin electron-positron plasma immersed in a cold radiation of neutrinos and photons. Other studies presume a closed universe collapsing in a big crunch and others again investigate the nearer future of humankind, say a few million years from now. While many of these studies are not concerned with the final state of life, some are, and it is this latter group that constitutes physical eschatology proper. According to John Barrow and Frank Tipler, the research field is, "the study of the survival and the behavior of life in the far future" (Barrow and Tipler 1986: 658). Physical eschatologists usually ignore the religious associations of their studies or deny that they exist. Tipler is a controversial exception, however. Not only does he argue that some kind of life can continue forever in a closed universe, he also claims that it is the very collapse of the universe that permits eternal life. When the final eternity has been reached at what he calls the "omega point," life becomes omniscient and the temporal becomes atemporal. According to Tipler, the final singularity is God and "theology is nothing but physical cosmology based on the assumption that life as a whole is immortal" (Tipler 1995: 17). His views are undoubtedly extreme, but (and perhaps for this reason) they have caused much discussion among theologians.

The term physical eschatology indicates a connection to biblical eschatology, but it is far from clear that the two are related in any meaningful sense. The message of the Bible is not so much the end of the physical universe as it is about the imminent return of Christ, the transformation of humans from flesh to spirit, and the final kingdom of God. It is about the ultimate destiny and goal of humans, not of self-reproducing robots. The scenario of a closed universe, such as argued by Tipler, might appear to be more compatible with the biblical view than the case of the ever-expanding universe, but even in the former case it is hard to establish a meaningful connection. While the end of the world does not conflict with the Bible, the claims of immortality of intelligent life forms (not necessarily humans) do. The Bible says that God alone is immortal and that all his created beings are doomed to extinction unless God decides otherwise.

Several theologians have expressed concern about the cosmologists' scenarios of the end of the universe and stressed that there is a world of difference between these scenarios and proper eschatology. According to Wolfhart Pannenberg the Christian affirmation of an imminent end of the world is scarcely reconcilable with the cosmological extrapolations of the state of the universe zillions of years ahead. Karl Peters probably speaks for the majority of theologians when he writes:

If the expanding universe is indeed open, expanding forever, then how can one speak of God recreating the universe? If the universe is closed, then it is likely to end in a 'big crunch' of mammoth black-hole proportions. Again, it is difficult to see how a new creation can take place.

(cited in Schwarz 2000: 180)

Whereas Pannenberg, Peters, Arthur Peacocke and others tend to think that physical and Christian eschatology are either contradictory or incommensurable, Craig has taken a more reconcilable view. According to him, the cosmologists' versions of secular eschatology furnish grounds for taking seriously the hypothesis of a transcendent creative and omnipotent agent. This agent might not be the classical God, but more likely God in a panentheistic version (Craig 2008).

Conclusions: Cosmology and God

Should cosmological questions be answered by religion or by science? Theistic religions have always made cosmological claims. But in the twentieth century it became possible to discuss cosmological questions within the context of the mathematical and empirical sciences. Thus, cosmology provides a central locus for interaction between religious and scientific world views.

However, the story of the interaction between cosmology and theism is by no means clear cut. A naive reading of twentieth-century cosmology might count the big bang as supporting theism, and steady-state cosmology as supporting atheism (and of course, philosophers such as W. L. Craig have attempted to justify this view). But such a view misses many nuances, both in the historical record, and in physical cosmology itself. From a historical point of view, there has been very little correlation between the religious views of scientific cosmologists and their proposed cosmological models. From an epistemological point of view, there are numerous obstacles to claiming that the big bang confirms the hypothesis that God exists. And from a metaphysical point of view, God's hand is not manifest even in big-bang models: these models have no first

state for God to create, and these models have no time for God to exist in before the big bang.

However, we do not intend to support a sort of neo-positivism according to which scientific cosmology can neither support nor undermine (nor motivate reinterpretation of) theological claims, such as the doctrine of creation ex nihilo. To the contrary, cosmology's implications for metaphysics (and, in particular, for theism) have provided, and will continue to provide, a strong motivation for studying this field of physical science.

Related Topics

Chapter 12: Twenty-First-Century Intellectual Life; Chapter 13: Evidence; Chapter 14: Naturalism; Chapter 16: Natural Sciences; Chapter 54: The Meaning of Life

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PHILOSOPHICAL METHODOLOGY

Charles Taliaferro

Theism has flourished in Western philosophy, thanks in part to the work of Plato (428–348 BCE) and Aristotle (384–322 BCE). Both philosophers were theists (in the very broad sense of the term) and their massive influence on the history of ideas insured that theism would be a topic of interest for many ancient, medieval, Renaissance, and modern philosophers. Modern science did not (at least at first) diminish philosophical interest in theism, as all the great early modern scientists (Kepler (1571–1630), Newton (1643–1727), et al.) were theists. Theism played a significant role in the early modern philosophical work on skepticism (Descartes' *Meditations* (1641)) and even some of the great early modern skeptics (Pierre Bayle (1647–1706)) subscribed to theism. In analytic philosophy in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, theism has been a major recipient of positive and negative attention. While two of the gigantic founders or leaders of what has become known as analytic philosophy were skeptics, G. E. Moore (1873–1958) and Bertrand Russell (1872–1970), the methods of analytic philosophy themselves are not inimical to theism for some of the most outstanding analytic philosophers today are theists (such as Alvin Plantinga and Richard Swinburne) or sympathetic to theism (William Rowe). Significant numbers of atheist and agnostic analytic philosophers (such as Richard Gale and Michael Tooley) have also authored serious work critical of theism, thus further securing the place of theism as a topic of great interest. Theism has had an important role in Continental philosophy in the early modern era (Descartes (1596–1650), Pascal (1623–62), Leibniz (1646–1716), and Kant (1724–1804) were theists, albeit in Kant's case, his theism was a matter of moral faith) and theists have made use of the philosophical methodologies of empiricism, rationalism, and its hybrids.

In the twentieth century, theism has been an important theme on the European Continent, especially in phenomenology and existentialism, and theistic issues played an important role in the work of Karl Jaspers (1883–1969), Martin Buber (1878–1965), Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929), Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973), Simone Weil (1909–43), Emmanuel Levinas (1906–95), and in the later atheistic work of Jacques Derrida (1930–2004). The fact that theism has played such a vital role in the different methodological frameworks of these philosophers is testimony to the breadth and accessibility of theism as a worldview.

The different methodologies employed by the philosophers cited above will bring to light different facets of theism. Thus philosophers employing an analytic methodology

have put a premium on conceptual clarity or criticism, offering highly nuanced analyses of divine attributes and the like. Those employing phenomenology have instead given center stage to experience, offering a critical investigation of religious experience and the like.

The resilience of theism in different methodological contexts has not, however, made it immune to criticisms from hostile methodological terrain. The most inhospitable conditions were set up in the mid-twentieth century by an aggressive empiricism known as logical positivism. Its advocates (foremost among them and the most well known being A. J. Ayer (1910–89)) contended that a proposition is meaningful if and only if it is verifiable empirically or it concerns tautologies or other conceptual claims (definitions, mathematics and the like). It was argued that theism is nonsense for an incorporeal God is not empirically verifiable. Logical positivism eventually collapsed for a variety of reasons. It was argued that if it is true, its own statement of what is meaningful is not meaningful because it is not empirically verifiable. Others challenged the highly restricted concept of “empirical” experience. Why not a much broader concept of experience which might (in principle) even include the claim to experience God (see Taliaferro 2005a: chapter 8)?

The demise of logical positivism led to a significant revival of philosophical theism, but the coast is still not all clear. In what follows, I will examine three contemporary domains in which philosophical methodology has not been friendly to theism: methodological naturalism, Wittgensteinian methodology, and nonrealism. After surveying these domains, I will consider the current debate over the nature and value of evidence in the philosophical inquiry into the nature and justification of theism.

Methodological Naturalism

There are two forms of naturalism that are popular in the current intellectual climate, what could be called strict naturalism and broad naturalism. According to the first, reality is best described and explained by the natural sciences. According to the latter (sometimes called liberal or commonsense naturalism) the social sciences are also acceptable. But both camps are clear that there can be no meaningful appeal to theism in terms of explaining any events. Here is Matthew Bagger’s account of what is commonly known today as methodological naturalism:

[W]e can never assert that, in principle, an event resists naturalistic explanation. A perfectly substantial, anomalous event, rather than providing evidence for the supernatural, merely calls into question our understanding of particular laws. In the modern era, this position fairly accurately represents the educated response to novelty. Rather than invoke the supernatural, we can always adjust our knowledge of the natural in extreme cases. In the modern age in actual inquiry, we never reach the point where we throw up our hands and appeal to divine intervention to explain a localized event like an extraordinary experience.

(Bagger 1999: 13)

Strict and broad naturalists are united in their rejection of theism and “immaterial entities” (De Caro and Macarthur 2010: 12, 13).

Paul Draper and others have argued that the success of methodological naturalism is a good reason for accepting naturalism as a worldview:

We have seen that the success of science in providing naturalistic explanations of natural phenomena strengthens the presumption of naturalism and so helps to support a modest methodological naturalism. More important, though, it strongly supports metaphysical naturalism over both supernaturalism in general and theism in particular. To put the point crudely, metaphysical naturalism “predicts” that science will succeed in discovering natural causes for natural phenomena, while supernaturalism and theism, though certainly consistent with such success, do not predict it. To put the point much more precisely, such success is antecedently much more probable given metaphysical naturalism than it is given supernaturalism or given theism. Therefore, it strongly supports metaphysical naturalism over both supernaturalism and theism: it significantly raises the ratio of the probability of metaphysical naturalism to the probability of each of these other hypotheses. This argument represents an often ignored version of the problem of divine hiddenness. The problem here is not the problem of why, if God exists, she would allow reasonable nonbelief . . . , but rather, the more fundamental problem of why, if God or other supernatural beings exist, science can completely ignore them and explain so much.

(Draper 2007: 299)

Naturalists have further argued that theism, in principle, is not well suited for explanatory purposes. Jan Narveson makes this point at length:

It ought to be regarded as a major embarrassment to natural theology that the very idea of something like a universe’s being “created” by some minded being is sufficiently mind-boggling that any attempt to provide a detailed account of how it might be done is bound to look silly, or mythical, or a vaguely anthropomorphized version of some familiar physical process. Creation stories abound in human societies, as we know. Accounts ascribe the creation to various mythical beings, chief gods among a sizeable polytheistic committee, giant tortoises, super-mom hens, and, one is tempted to say, God-knows-what. The Judeo-Christian account does no better, and perhaps does a bit worse, in proposing a “six-day” process of creation.

(Narveson 2003: 93)

Narveson holds that theism is defective because it is unable to explain how it is that divine agency functions:

It is plainly no surprise that details about just how all this was supposed to have happened [God creating the cosmos] are totally lacking when they are not, as I say, silly or simply poetic. For the fundamental idea is that some infinitely powerful mind simply willed it to be thus, and as they say, Lo!, it was so! If we aren’t ready to accept that as an explanatory description – as we should not be, since it plainly doesn’t explain anything, as distinct from merely asserting that it was in fact done – then where do we go from there? On all accounts, we at this point meet up with mystery. “How are we supposed to know the ways of the infinite and almighty God?” it is asked – as if that put-down made a decent substitute for an answer. But of course it doesn’t. If we are serious about “natural theology,” then we ought to be ready to supply content in our explication of

theological hypotheses. Such explications carry the brunt of explanation. Why does water boil when heated? The scientific story supplies an analysis of matter in its liquid state, the effects of atmospheric pressure and heat, and so on until we see, in impressive detail, just how the thing works. An explanation's right to be called "scientific" is, indeed, in considerable part earned precisely by its ability to provide such detail.

(Narveson 2003: 93)

How might theism be defended in response to this dismissal of supernaturalism and Narveson's disparagement of theistic explanations?

Several points are worth observing in response. Contra strict naturalism, there are good reasons to think that naturalists cannot and should not rule out the existence of consciousness (see Baker and Goetz 2011). And insofar as naturalists are also compelled to recognize irreducible intentional explanations, there seems to be a reply to Narveson (see Goetz 2009). If he demands that there be a mediated mechanism to account for our exercise of power, he seems to rule out basic powers for humans. And this seems implausible. Philosophers as diverse as Arthur Danto and Roderick Chisholm have argued that, on pain of an infinite regress, some of our acts must be basic and unmediated (see Chisholm 1976). If my intending to write this sentence required me to intend something else and that required a further intention . . . , then I would have no powers of intentionality. Narveson caricatures God creating light by willing that there be light, but caution is in order lest we render nonsensical my deciding to turn on a light so that I might see you better.

As for "immaterial entities," the concept of what counts as material or immaterial is highly contentious. I have argued elsewhere for a nonmaterialist view of consciousness (Taliaferro 1994). Rather than recapitulate such arguments, I cite one materialist, Michael Lockwood, who has pointed out the ostensible implausibility of materialism:

Let me begin by nailing my colours to the mast. I count myself a materialist, in the sense that I take consciousness to be a species of brain activity. Having said that, however, it seems to me evident that no description of brain activity of the relevant kind, couched in the currently available languages of physics, physiology, or functional or computational roles, is remotely capable of capturing what is distinctive about consciousness. So glaring, indeed, are the shortcomings of all the reductive programmes currently on offer, that I cannot believe that anyone with a philosophical training, looking dispassionately at these programmes, would take any of them seriously for a moment, were it not for a deep-seated conviction that current physical science has essentially got reality taped, and accordingly, something along the lines of what the reductionists are offering must be correct. To that extent, the very existence of consciousness seems to me to be a standing demonstration of the explanatory limitations of contemporary physical science. On the assumption that some form of materialism is nevertheless true, we have only to introspect in order to recognize that our present understanding of matter is itself radically deficient. Consciousness remains for us, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, what it was for Newton at the dawn of the eighteenth century: an occult power that lies beyond the pool of illumination that physical theory casts on the world we inhabit.

(Lockwood 2003: 447)

If consciousness (intentions, desires and so on) turns out to be nonphysical then naturalists need to accommodate it in bona fide explanations, and if one cannot or should not rule out irreducible teleological explanations, then we seem to be en route to entertaining a cosmic teleological explanation in the form of theism.

One further important point needs to be made before addressing Draper and his concerns about the difference between scientific and philosophical explanations. Some naturalists appear to believe that if there is a God who created and sustains the cosmos, there must be material or scientifically determinable signs of God's action. John Searle, for example, writes:

If it should turn out that God exists, that would have to be a fact of nature like any other. To the four basic forces in the universe—gravity, electromagnetism, weak and strong nuclear forces—we would add a fifth, the divine force. Or more likely, we would see the other forces as forms of the divine force. But it would still be all physics, albeit divine physics. If the supernatural existed, it too would have to be natural.

(Searle 1998: 35)

Searle and many naturalists seem to insufficiently appreciate the theistic claim that God is the necessarily existing, omnipresent, all good, omnipotent, omniscient creator and sustainer of the cosmos. According to theism, that the cosmos exists at all or endures over time and at any time is due to God's ongoing creative conservation. This thesis does not entail that there would be some material divine force in the cosmos (like radiation) but that the cosmos as a whole only exists in virtue of God's purposive action. The fact (if it is one) that God sustains a contingent cosmos does not compete with natural and social science; rather, it accounts for why there exists and persists a cosmos at all. Timothy O'Connor develops this point well in a recent defense of the cosmological argument:

If our universe truly is contingent, the obtaining of certain fundamental facts or other will be explained without empirical theory, whatever the topological structure of empirical reality. An infinite regress of beings in or outside the spatiotemporal universe cannot forestall such a result. If there is to be an ultimate, or complete, explanation, it will have to ground in some way the most fundamental, contingent facts of the universe in a necessary being, something which has the reason for its existence within its own nature. It bears emphasis that such an unconditional explanation need not in any way compete with conditional, empirical explanations. Indeed, it is natural to suppose that empirical explanations will be subsumed within the larger structure of the complete explanation.

(O'Connor 2008: 76)

Because theism does not compete with science, the fact that science can be successfully practiced without positing a divine, physically detectable force is no reason to prefer naturalism to theism. Moreover, I suggest naturalism leaves us with the brute, unexplained fact of the cosmos, whereas theism provides a reason why there is a cosmos in which science can be practiced. Naturalism and theism are on no less than a par in terms of predicting future scientific success, while theism provides us with a reason why

such predictability is possible and naturalism leaves us with the inexplicable brute fact of the cosmos (see Mackie 1982: 85–6; Taliaferro and Evans 2011).

Naturalists, however, have an important counter-argument. What if it turns out that theism is incoherent or not a suitable candidate for providing an explanatory framework? Let us turn to some Wittgensteinian arguments that would undermine theism.

Wittgensteinian Objections to Theism

The actual views about theism held by Ludwig Wittgenstein himself (1889–1951) are steeped in so much controversy that it is nearly impossible to unpack his settled positions and arguments here. We are not, however, in the dark about D. Z. Phillips, who saw himself as following Wittgenstein, and so let us focus on Phillips. (Note that I am classifying the arguments that follow as Wittgensteinian while leaving it an open matter whether or not Wittgenstein would have endorsed them.)

Phillips believes that theism rests on conceptual confusion, a radical misunderstanding or mistreatment of concepts and language. Here are some objections he has advanced against theism involving four claims that can be referred to as “The Problem with Everything,” “No Space for Theism,” “The Problem with a Divine Identity,” and “The Problem of the Unintelligibility of Theistic Consciousness.” Because they are interrelated, let us consider each of them sequentially and then consider some replies.

The Problem with Everything Argument: Phillips opposes the idea that philosophy and science promote or investigate theories about the structure of the world. Theism as a world-view seems to require that it makes sense to refer to God as the creator of the universe or everything that exists apart from God. Phillips doubts whether such a claim makes sense:

What kind of theory is a theory about the structure of the world? If by “the world” one wants to mean “everything”, there is no such theory. Certainly, science has no such theory, nor could it have. “Everything” is not the name of one big thing or topic, and, therefore, there can be no theory concerning a thing or topic of this kind. To speak of a thing is to acknowledge the existence of many things, since one can always be asked which thing one is referring to. Science is concerned with specific states of affairs, no matter how wide the scope of its questions may be. Whatever explanations it offers, further questions can be asked about them. It makes no sense to speak of a last answer in science, one that does not admit of any further questions. Science is not concerned with “the structure of the world”, and there are no scientific investigations which have this as their subject.

(Phillips 2005: xv–xvi)

If Phillips is right, philosophy cannot, just as science cannot, permit us to speak of a God of everything. An example of nonsense from Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* might be useful. Questions about what time it is make sense when we are addressing terrestrial time-zones, but it makes little sense to ask what time it is on the sun (Wittgenstein 1953: 350). Similarly, Phillips maintains that once we are referring to “everything” we have lost a proper framework of individuation.

The No Space for Theism Argument: Phillips contends that theistic metaphysics mistakenly treats religious language about God in a referential fashion that singles out a supernatural being or transcendent creator. According to Phillips, religious language

only makes sense with respect to embedded religious practices. To suppose that “divine consciousness is supposed to be the source of the reality of all things” is to suppose there is something for which there is no metaphysical space, and to suppose otherwise is an “intellectual aberration.” The reason given is an analogy involving mathematics. By Phillips’ lights, mathematical truths are features of mathematical practices, as opposed to referring to mind-independent truths or properties.

Similarly, it is not “consciousness,” metaphysically conceived, that shows us what is meant by “the mind of God,” but the religious practice in which that notion has its application. But do not be drawn into the old confusion: if one finds out what is meant by “the mind of God” and gives heed to it, that is what one is heeding, not the practice.

(Phillips 2005: 46)

In a range of published articles and books, Phillips has contended that religious use and practice leads one to think that ostensible references to God turn out to be an invocation to living a certain way (a life of compassion, grace, courage, solidarity with the vulnerable, and so on). On this view, when someone claims they are seeking to discern the mind of God they are committing themselves to careful, sensitive reflection about some matter at hand, but they are not trying to make contact with a metaphysical divine mind (Phillips 1970).

The Problem of Identity Argument: Phillips claims that theism is unable to account for divine ideas, thoughts or language. This is partly because God is an incorporeal being who (prior to creation) is without other beings. Phillips’ reasoning here involves what is known as the private language argument, according to which meaningful language requires a community in which public usage is correctable:

God as pure consciousness, preexisting all things, is said to have ideas and to entertain thoughts. But what makes these ideas and thoughts what they are? The logical difficulties inherent in the empiricist notion of “ideas” reemerge, difficulties encapsulated in Wittgenstein’s arguments against a logically private language. Nor will it do to say that God’s thoughts and ideas need be only potentially sharable, not actually shared, since this will not secure the essential distinction between “following a rule” and “thinking one is following a rule,” between “getting it right” and “thinking one has got it right”. . . . For the idea that the rule is intelligible prior to its having common use, would require the rule to provide, without such mediation, its own application. To postulate a rule for the use of the rule would leave us with the same problem, plus the prospect of an infinite regress. To know whether an individual is following a rule correctly, there must be a context other than the individual user in which a distinction between correct and incorrect has a purchase.

(Phillips 2005: 45–6)

Because God is not part of a social, linguistic community, divine speech and meaning is problematic.

The Unintelligibility of Theistic Consciousness Argument: Phillips writes about another problem facing the concept of a conscious theistic God. The problem that follows is akin to the earlier problem of God being disembodied and not being in a community:

"Consciousness" cannot yield the identity of its possessor. Consciousness cannot tell me who I am. If it is supposed to pick me out, I'd need to experience a number of consciousnesses, which is absurd . . . If, on the other hand, consciousness is taken to mean my awareness of the world, or "there being a world for me," others are in that world just as much as I am. It is a world in which I may see others in pain, or cry out in pain myself, for example. The "I" has no privileged status here . . . I am who I am in a human neighborhood, as this person, not that one. But God has no neighbors. It may be thought that he could identify himself for himself with a self-authenticating definition: "I am this." But this falls foul of [the] critique of a magical conception of signs, the view that the meaning of a word or sound is a power inherent in them, rather than something that is found in their application.

(Phillips 2005: 46)

Let us now consider some replies. What about the problem of "everything"? Most theists do not claim God created everything when "everything" includes God. God is not *causa-sui* or self-caused. Historically, theists have instead held that God created this cosmos or everything that exists apart from God, as opposed to God creating some other cosmos. As it happens, some philosophers (theists and non-theists) believe we can distinguish between what are called possible worlds (or maximal states of affairs); there is, for example, a possible world in which there are unicorns and a possible world such as ours where there are not. Given this framework, there seems to be no conceptual error in claiming God created our cosmos rather than a different one, or no cosmos at all. As for science, why think that its concerns with "specific states of affairs" isn't part of an investigation into "the structure of the world"? Perhaps science as well as philosophy will always raise new questions, but that does not mean that big comprehensive accounts of reality like theism and scientific naturalism (to be discussed below) are unintelligible.

As for Phillips' "No Space for Theism" argument, a full reply is not possible here. But perhaps it is enough to note that theism at least seems to be referential (see Trigg 1973, 1989). When a practicing Jew, Christian or Muslim prays it appears they are calling on God/Allah. Muslims even believe they are all calling on the same God (Qur'an 29:46), even if they believe Jews and Christians are in error for not accepting the revelation proclaimed by Muhammad.

The "Identity" and "Consciousness" arguments can be handled together. Phillips assumes that in a linguistic community, we would be able to follow linguistic rules and thus (in a sense) know what we are talking about. Absent a community, how would we know we are employing terms correctly? One reply is to question whether even in a community, we can know that our linguistic practices are accurate. It has been argued elsewhere that these are possible cases where a person might have uniform, conventional linguistic use and behavior, and yet the terms differ in meaning (for example, what you and I both call "blue" might have different sensory content, even though there is no discernible difference in our linguistic usage; see Taliaferro (1994)). So, if we cannot assume other competent language users mean the same as we do by their words, why assume that other beings would have to have certain knowledge of linguistic practices for them to use language or to know what sensory states they are in and so on? And even if Phillips were correct that a human person could not refer to objects or herself without being in a linguistic community (which is doubtful), why is there any reason to think that all conceivable/possible beings should be subject to this constraint? Like

the charge that God cannot hear prayers unless God has ears, this involves (in the end) an insistence that knowledge of the world can only be achieved if the knower has an animal body. What empirical or scientific discovery has shown us that it is necessarily the case that only animal bodies can think or refer to the world? It should also be noted that in classical theism, God's knowledge is not construed as mediated through organs or rule following.

By way of a further reply to Phillips' view that knowledge must be public and not privilege first-person awareness, even if we agree that we can see others in pain and so on, it is peculiar to assert that the one in pain has no privileged access to his own states, and surely it would need considerable argument to conclude that I only know that I am in pain because I have neighbors who have instructed me on linguistic usage. Phillips' reference to "consciousness" also seems odd. "Consciousness" does not name a subject or individual, but the state or activity of a subject or individual. And why think you or I would need language to think about ourselves? I suggest, rather, that some self-awareness must be prior to language use. One cannot (or so it appears) follow rules or learn language without (the antecedent presence of) consciousness (otherwise how would one hear words?).

The Challenge of Nonrealism

Kantian and other assaults on metaphysics have been formidable and, if successful, would render theism null and void as an account of reality. Interpretative debates continue to plague a facile summary of Kant on metaphysics, but philosophers agree that Kant held that human cognition is limited to the phenomenal realm of appearance and cannot penetrate the noumenal world of things in themselves. Kant writes:

All our intuition is nothing but the representation of appearance; that the things that we intuit are not in themselves what we intuit them to be, nor are their relations so constituted in themselves as they appear to us; and that if we remove our own subject or even only the subjective constitution of the senses in general, then all the constitution, all relations of objects in space and time, indeed space and time themselves would disappear, and as appearances they cannot exist in themselves, but only in us. What may be the case with objects in themselves and abstracted from all this receptivity of our sensibility remains entirely unknown to us. We are acquainted with nothing except our way of perceiving them, which is peculiar to us, and which therefore does not necessarily pertain to every being, though to be sure it pertains to every human being.

(Kant 1998 [1781]: A42)

Some philosophers today, for reasons other than those provided by Kant, take umbrage over ontology. Perhaps the most dramatic recent condemnation of ontology can be found in Hilary Putnam's *Ethics Without Ontology*. Putnam complements ontology but along the way he describes it as a "stinking corpse." I cite this partly to document not just the intellectual rejection of ontology, but to convey a current distaste for the enterprise:

I promised an obituary on Ontology, but to extend those remarks would not be so much an obituary as flogging a dead horse. Instead I shall just say this (since

it is customary to say at least one good word about the dead): even if Ontology has become a stinking corpse, in Plato and Aristotle it represented the vehicle for conveying many genuine philosophical insights. The insights still preoccupy all of us in philosophy who have any historical sense at all. But the vehicle has long since outlived its usefulness.

(Putnam 2004: 85)

Despite the condemnation of metaphysics and ontology by such prestigious philosophers, metaphysics has proved to be resilient and is currently enjoying a renaissance (see Stroll 2009). The Kantian project seems to suffer multiple problems. For example, despite Kant's relegation of causation to only the phenomenal world, he (inconsistently) held that the phenomenal world was caused by the noumenal world. On this view, causation and its related concepts (space and time) are not restricted to the phenomenal world. For another example, Kant sought to ground necessary truths in terms of the structure of human cognition, but why should necessary human structures be any less mysterious than believing in necessarily existing abstract objects (as in the work of Plato, Leibniz, Frege, Chisholm)? Moreover, extensive critical realist accounts of perception challenge Kant's skepticism. Granted, human perception should not be presumed to be infallible, but perception can be a source of knowledge. I can be sure, for example, that my copy of Kant's first *Critique* is on my desk right now (for a further defense of metaphysical realism, see Alston (2001, 1996)).

Putnam's attack on realism is grounded on his view that our access to the way things are is always mediated by conceptual schemes. Putnam claims that

access to the world is through our discourse and the role that the discourse plays in our lives; we compare our discourse with the world as it is presented to us or constructed for us by discourse itself, making in the process new worlds out of old ones.

(Putnam 1990: 121)

Putnam seems to hold that metaphysical realism is undermined because we can never achieve a God's-eye point of view or secure the view that a God's-eye point of view is even possible. We cannot escape "our own skins" (Putnam 1990: 125). Putnam believes that we can and should recognize the truth of multiple, mutually exclusive views of reality. "Objects are theory-dependent in the sense that theories with incompatible ontologies can both be right" (Putnam 1990: 40). From this vantage point, theism seems unpromising, to say the least.

Serious questions have been raised about Putnam's and other anti-realists' work. One of the problems with most attacks on realism is that virtually all of them seem to presuppose some metaphysic or ontology. Putnam, for example, seems to recognize the fact that there are conceptual frameworks, theories, and discourses. This is an ontological claim and for his position to be coherent, it must be the case that to deny the existence of such things is mistaken (Loux 1998). Putnam also seems to be led to a deeply implausible position in claiming that incompatible ontologies can both be right, if that means both can be true (try to imagine that both atheism and theism are true), which is different from acknowledging that incompatible ontologies might have equally good reasons behind them. Furthermore, Putnam seems simply wrong that we cannot escape our own skins through empathetic imagination and the affective identification with others. The

case for racial justice has been built, historically, on persons coming to see the world from the point of view of persons of different ethnicity (including imagining one having skin that is quite different; see Taliaferro 2005b). Moreover, Roger Trigg rightly contends that Putnam seems to give us a misleading picture of our options: either we must claim to know everything from every point of view or we must abandon realism:

We should not be forced into a choice between reasoning about everything and reasoning about nothing. Just because we cannot possess omniscience, does that mean that the only alternative is to be content with the prejudices of our time and place? The function of metaphysics is surely to warn us of the dangers of such parochialism. Where we are is not necessarily where we ought to be. We can reason about our circumstances and our position in them, even if we can never leave them completely.

(Trigg 1993: 121)

Theism, Evidence, Justification, and Warrant

One of the biggest, current debates about theism and philosophical methods concerns the nature and status of evidence for and against the truth of theism. One widespread position, held by theists, atheists, and agnostics, is known as evidentialism. This is the view that if a person is justified in a certain belief, she must have available (she can call to mind) sufficient evidence making the belief more reasonable than suspending judgment on whether the belief is true. This is challenged by a variety of alternative proposals, one of which is reliabilism. From a reliabilist point of view, a person can be justified in her belief so long as it is produced in a way that makes it likely to be true, even if the person does not possess anything that we would call evidence on its behalf.

One of the most important cases of non-evidentialist methodology has been what is called reformed epistemology. Alvin Plantinga and others defend a non-evidentialist account of warrant. A belief is warranted—you are entitled to the belief as a person with intellectual integrity—if three conditions are met:

- (1) It has been produced in you by cognitive faculties that are working properly (functioning as they ought to, subject to no cognitive dysfunction) in a cognitive environment that is appropriate for your kinds of cognitive faculties,
- (2) the segment of the design plan governing the production of that belief is aimed at the production of true beliefs, and
- (3) there is a high statistical probability that a belief produced under those conditions will be true under those conditions.

(Plantinga 1993: 46, 47; in the original, Plantinga uses the first person)

When reformed epistemologists describe more closely the mechanism or trigger of religious belief as a sense of God (*sensus divinitas*), they are simply advocating a version of an argument from religious experience (in other words, their claim is that a person may be warranted in believing they are experiencing God if it appears that God is being experienced and the person is not aware of any reason to deny the veracity of the experience). Indeed, filling out such an argument might help enhance the case for reformed epistemology, but, in fact, some reformed epistemologists resist the notion that proper function need involve any evidential mediation.

The arguments over whether evidence is essential for warrant can be read as vindicating an overall evidential framework. Those arguing for reformed epistemology, along with others who might claim that a person can have a legitimate belief by faith, still appeal to arguments and, thus, evidence when they maintain that their position is reasonable. On a higher level of debate, then, evidence seems essential, even if evidence is not essential on the basic level of the religious believer.

One lesson to draw from the current debate on methodology is that, in the end, some kind of comprehensive investigation is called for in assessing theism and its alternatives. For example, assessing the legitimacy of Plantinga's proposal will involve some inquiry into the coherence of theism or the coherence of its alternatives. (Plantinga has argued that theism's chief rival, naturalism, is self-defeating.) More is needed in favor of or against theism than a single line of inquiry.

In closing, let us consider a proposal by Fred Feldman that in the face of conflicting reasons for holding a position one should withhold judgment. Feldman asks us to imagine a case of two academics looking out at a college quad: one thinks he sees the dean and the other does not. Assuming they are in similar conditions (they both have good eyesight, a decent vantage point, and so on), Feldman proposes that in the face of disagreement, they should both suspend judgment. This leads Feldman to defend the following position:

After examining this evidence, I find myself with an inclination, perhaps a strong inclination, to think that this evidence supports P. It may even be that I can't help but believe P. But I see that another person, every bit as sensible and serious as I, has an opposing reaction. Perhaps this person has some bit of evidence that cannot be shared, or perhaps he takes the evidence differently than I do. It's difficult to know everything about his mental life and thus difficult to tell exactly why he believes as he does. One of us must be making some kind of mistake or failing to see some truth. But I have no basis for thinking that the one making the mistake is him rather than me. And the same is true of him. And in that case, the right thing for both of us to do is to suspend judgment on P.

(Feldman 2007: 212)

There are several problems with Feldman's position. First, it is self-refuting. There are persons (e.g., Roderick Chisholm) who are as sensible and serious as Feldman who think (and have a strong inclination to believe) that Feldman's principle is false. Under these conditions, it seems that if Feldman adheres to his principle, he should reject the principle itself. Second, the example of whether one sees a dean in a quad is light-years away from the context of religious belief and practice. There is not space to explore this in detail here, but locating an academic on a campus is profoundly different from someone believing they have had a living encounter with God and comparing notes with a friend who has not had such an experience. Perhaps related to this is a third point: there is a slight edge to be given to experiences that appear to justify a positive claim as opposed to the failure to experience some presence, be it God, the self, or a dean. Adopting Feldman's example, if you seem to see the dean waving at you (her wild hair and academic robes seem just as you would expect if she were in the quad), why would my failing to see this give you reason to suspend judgment? You might have reason to call out to the dean to get some confirmation (however elusive) of her presence, but suspending judgment does not seem at all a requirement. Suspension seems especially inappropriate if

you do have some evidence for your belief and yet you realize that “perhaps [a person not sharing your belief] has some bit of evidence that cannot be shared.” If the mere possibility of counterevidence undermines belief, would any belief be reasonable? In closing, let us consider a paradox that must be faced with any philosophical reflection on methodology.

The Problem of the Criterion

There is an interesting argument that plagues the quest to find the best method to acquire knowledge. Take any method you currently employ. The question arises: what method did you use to find out whether your method is justified? Imagine you have such a “higher” method to employ to identify the best method. Well how did you know that that higher method is the right one? And so on. If you try to stop the regress by claiming your method is self-validating, you appear to beg the question against the skeptic.

Roderick Chisholm has proposed that the best reply to the problem of the criterion is to begin inquiry with particular claims of what we know (Chisholm 1989). We know (at least presumably) that we exist and you know you are reading an article, and so on. Chisholm thought that philosophers should then construct or make clear the method or criteria (assuming there are such) we employ in acquiring such knowledge.

If we know ahead of time that theism is false, we need not employ a methodology that would vindicate the truth of theism. This seems to be Ann Taves’ position. She seems to know theism is false and thus she does not employ a method that would allow for a non-naturalist/theistic account of religious experience. In *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, Taves takes note of when subjects she studies in different cultures might attribute the cause of an event to either a non-naturalistic religious or a natural cause.

The likelihood of choosing a religious rather than a nonreligious attribution for a particular experience or event is determined in part by dispositional characteristics of the attributor such as (1) the relative availability to that person of religious and naturalistic meaning-belief systems, (2) beliefs about the relative efficacy of religious and naturalistic mechanisms for controlling events, and (3) the relative importance of religious and naturalistic sources of self esteem.

(Taves 2009: 170)

This is an odd claim about “self esteem,” but leaving aside this concern, the bigger point is that Taves herself nowhere allows in principle for anything but naturalistic explanations. She is very much in the Matthew Bagger naturalist camp:

The book is written for those interested in taking both perspectives into account to develop a naturalistic understanding of experiences deemed religious. Such a pursuit does not rule out religious understandings of experience that are compatible with a naturalistic approach, but it does not develop them. My own view is that the cultivation of some forms of experience that we want to deem religious or spiritual can enhance our well-being and ability to function in the world, individually and collectively. Identifying those forms, however, is not the purpose of this book.

(Taves 2009: xiv)

But, of course, a spiritualized naturalism will be cold comfort to a committed theist. From a theistic point of view, Taves would be akin to a radical behaviorist who simply ruled out in principle any first-person experiential evidence.

If both theism and naturalism are countenanced as live options, then one has as much reason to assume methodological theism (no explanations are acceptable that are not ultimately accounted for by God's conservation of the cosmos) as to assume methodological naturalism. My own proposal is that the better methodology in assessing religious experience, for example, would be one that does not (as with Taves and Bagger) beg the question against theism from the outset (for further reflection on religious experience and methodology, see [Chapter 29 Religious Experience](#)).

Consider one objection in closing. Against Draper and Searle, it was argued above that theism is a philosophical position and the arguments supporting it are philosophical as opposed to scientific. But some theists claim that some specific events (the emergence of consciousness, religious experiences, the Resurrection of Christ) and not just the existence and sustained existence of the cosmos as a whole call for theistic explanations. If these events are caused by God, shouldn't such events be scrutable to the natural sciences such that a scientist qua scientist and not qua philosopher has to make God part of the scientific worldview? Or to put the question in terms of historical inquiry: If God brought about the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, shouldn't a historian be able to recognize such a miracle?

Possibly so, but several points need to be noted. First, if God does bring about a miracle such as the Resurrection it does not follow that there might be plausible accounts of the event that would explain the event which do not include reference to divine agency. Second, the very nature of divine agency seems out of the purview of the scientist but not the philosopher. God is not a biological organism, element, force field, star or galaxy. God does not require nutrients or oxygen and carbon to act. If theism is true, God certainly can be manifested to the scientific or historical inquirer (by, for example, making all blind people see, all deaf people hear, and so on, during Christmas accompanied by hosts of angels declaring God's command that there be peace, etc., etc.), but in the events that some theists claim God is active, the divine agency is more subtle. A good, but imperfect analogy might involve free agency. When we perform some acts, do we have the power to do otherwise? Some determinists deny this, claiming that every event in the cosmos is determined and could not be otherwise, given antecedent and contemporaneous conditions and the laws of nature. On that view, none of us has the power to do anything other than what we are determined to do. It is hard to see, however, whether contemporary science can establish or rule out free agency. We now recognize indeterminacy, at least at the quantum level, and so there is an opening for free agency, but ultimately the case for free agency will be a philosophical one that balances science and the first-person experience of agency. The case for theism might be similar, requiring a comprehensive examination of its nature and explanatory power.

Related Topics

Chapter 13: Evidence; Chapter 14: Naturalism; Chapter 16: Natural Sciences; Chapter 18: Physical Cosmology; Chapter 21: Historical Inquiry; Chapter 25: Moral Inquiry; Chapter 36: Religious Diversity

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Recommended Reading

- Harrison, V. S. (2007) *Religion and Modern Thought*, London: SCM Press. A comprehensive, clear, excellent guide to many of the methodological debates in the study of religion.
- Taliaferro, C. and J. Evans (eds), (2011) *Turning Images in Philosophy, Science and Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. Eleven original essays on the role of the imagination in philosophical, scientific, and religious inquiry.
- Taliaferro, C., P. Draper, and P. L. Quinn (eds), (2010) *The Blackwell Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd edition, Oxford: Wiley Blackwell. Contains many entries that bear on the method of inquiring into religion.
- Wolterstorff, N. (1987) *Reason within the Bounds of Religion*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. A Christian philosopher examines the role of evidence in forming and supporting religious belief.

PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

Gwen Griffith-Dickson

Philosophy, Faith and Reason

Here is a simple idea: philosophy of religion is just another way to study theism, as sociology, theology, history and other disciplines do, as described in other contributions to this volume. On this reading it is all quite straightforward. Philosophy of religion differs from its nearest reflective discipline, theology, in that it studies belief in God asking slightly different questions and using somewhat different methods, and quite different sources. Instead of marshalling their arguments from the Bible and from ancient and contemporary Church documents, Christian philosophers of religion use logic and inferential reasoning. That “God must be good” is thought to be something that can be advanced and defended by pure logic; whereas that “God is a Trinity” is something that can only be defended with New Testament texts, as they have been interpreted and expounded by traditional Christian thinkers.

This common-sense view has a familiar ring to it. From the Jewish philosopher Philo in Egypt at the dawn of the Common Era, through to St Thomas Aquinas, the designation of philosophy as a “handmaid” has been employed to describe the intellectual task that philosophy is supposed to perform for rational faith in God. St Anselm described the project as “faith seeking understanding.” Modern Western philosophers have continued to plow this furrow. Philosophy, it is often said, grounds faith in a rational foundation, by showing whether or not it is worthy of belief. A theist might assert a truth on the basis of religious authority, or because it says so in a sacred text, or just because that’s what others in our village say and do—but philosophy can ground these claims (or overturn them) in something more robustly reasoned. It does so by assessing the claims made by religion.

Philosophy’s topics in a Western syllabus are those that can be tackled with the tools of reason, experience, and the contributions of history; and focus on vulnerable points in the architecture and construction of various forms of theism. On exam papers you will find questions on the problem that the existence of evil poses for belief in God; the roles and conflicts of faith and reason, knowledge and belief; the validity of arguments for God’s existence; the plausibility of claims of religious experience; the nature of religious language, and so on. All these are dealt with in other chapters of this volume.

It is a shame, then, that this simple story seems to be inadequate for understanding the relationship between the activity of “philosophy of religion” and the way of living called “theism.” Arguably philosophy of religion does not have the same kind of relationship to theism that sociology does. Philosophy of religion has created and shaped religious belief in God(s) for millennia; it is not just a set of disciplinary tools and methods, but an active agent—or agent provocateur—in the history of theism. Theisms have

often (but not always) pre-existed the schools of philosophy they have encountered. Philosophies have been upstarts who dare to come in and challenge the theisms. They have embraced and absorbed, attacked and vanquished each other. It is not only fundamentalist or traditionalist or conservative elements that have challenged the right of philosophy to provide the intellectual girders and joists of faith. Marxist theologians in Latin American liberation theology rejected the use of philosophy as the handmaid of theology, naming sociology and political science as more appropriate tools for interpreting the world in the light of the Gospel. The anti-philosophical rejectionism can be a manifesto commitment from the left-wing as much as the right. But their engagement has not merely been a matter of study so much as a history of influence.

The idea meanwhile that religious claims needed grounding in something else, and that philosophy of religion has the warrant to be that something else, has been disputed—for centuries—and not only by tetchy theologians but by philosophers themselves. Most recently, in late twentieth-century writing, counter-arguments have surfaced to assert that beliefs in God, just like other beliefs, can be “groundless” in a thoroughly respectable way. One line of argument, developed by, amongst others, D. Z. Phillips and Norman Malcolm, took off from the late Wittgenstein, who hinted that much of what we do and think rests on a bedrock that is not the result of methodical deduction (see especially Phillips 1993; Malcolm 1995). Another line of thought from American philosophers of Reformed traditions in Christianity, such as Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff and Robert Pargetter, examined the role of “basic beliefs,” those fundamental girders and joints of our world-view that cannot always be proven (see Plantinga 1981, 2000; Wolterstorff 1984; Pargetter 1990).

But the debate long antedates these English-speaking exemplars. There is a long-standing but tired picture of philosophy as equating to “reason” and religion as “faith,” and their fractious relationship as a reason–faith conflict. We have good reason not to tolerate this old wives’ tale. Even philosophers of different persuasions debate the status and role of reason as much as liberal Christians quarrel with creationism. Sample the arguments of the Muslim philosopher al-Ghazali in the eleventh century, the Jewish philosopher Judah Halevi in the same era, the Christian Johann Georg Hamann in the eighteenth, and many more ancient philosophers in the Indian traditions, and you will find deconstructions of reason that are subtle or coruscating, ironic or passionate.

We might also evaluate the bare-faced claim that philosophy of religion merely challenges religion in an objective and, of course, reasonable way. When we read some of its products from different times and places, do we not find that philosophy of religion on occasion tries to justify theism? Even if philosophers are scrupulous about playing by the rules, it is clear that some arguments have a drive and dynamism to justify (or unjustify) a particular tenet of faith—such as, that God is both good and omnipotent and somehow innocent if somewhat ineffective in the face of horrific evil on earth.

In which case, if it is really playing fair, philosophy of religion’s role is not exhausted by an examination of theism. It should also, equally and simultaneously, examine, overturn, ground, or justify *atheism*. For atheism, no less than theism, is making claims about God and the alleged religious aspects of human existence. And the arguments of atheists will also rest on philosophical assumptions and premises that can be examined and challenged. It is tempting to argue that this is a particularly important function for philosophy of religion now. Many of the argumentative challenges to so-called New Atheism in the early twenty-first century have been examples of “apologetics” rather than impartial analysis; but to be fair, the philosophical quality of the New Atheism has

not always deserved much better than it gets. (For examples of the New Atheism see Harris 2006 and Dawkins 2006.) The battle-scarred veteran of philosophy of religion could be forgiven for opining that the whole affair would be better served if conducted under the umbrella of philosophy of religion rather than the natural sciences or cultural studies; we have the technology. Philosophy of religion then would have a valuable role to play both in public engagement and raising the standard of public understanding of religion and atheism. It is not only a matter of having a well-tried methodology but of a tradition of philosophical self-discipline; in not going for the sound bite or slogan that, like most logical fallacies, is superficially but emotively plausible.

Philosophy of Religion as an Inquiry into Being

Religion does or doesn't need grounding; it is or isn't reasonable; what do all these disputing parties have in common? There is an assumption that the affair is all about knowledge; knowledge and its poor relation, belief. On this reading, the assumption is that philosophy of religion is, above all, a task of epistemology. But a very ancient tradition has maintained that the fundamental question of philosophy is not knowledge but being. What is known can only be conceived in relation to what is, and understanding existence itself is the first task of the thinker; being is the raw material of philosophy. The key question for such thinkers—whether European, Middle Eastern, or Asian, ancient, medieval or modern—is not, “How do we know religious truths?” but “How do the different kinds of beings or existents relate—how does the source of all existence relate to the individual beings of the world?” On this view, then, the first task of philosophy when it considers theism, the commitment to the existence of a Supreme Being, is not epistemology but metaphysics.

That this point of view is a way to burrow into the thinking not only of the Indian Vedāntin thinker Śaṅkara, the Christian St Thomas Aquinas, the Iranian Ayatollah Allamah Tabatabai—the list could be extended, wantonly—should make us perk up and reflect. How is it that key representatives of these different religions (whom popular culture tells us are all at war) are actually thinking the same sorts of things? We are not surprised when we find dramatically different problems and debates within the different religions; it is the similarities that perplex. Is there a “perennial philosophy,” a truth at the core of all religions, so that despite their apparent alienation from one another, each at heart believes the same thing?

Answering such a question would be a declaration of faith in itself; perhaps we should look elsewhere for an explanation. For the picture of religions as existing in isolation is a modern myth. A religion does not persist, over history, as a self-enclosed and impenetrable fortress. Not only is every religion composed of innumerable tendencies, all in riotous disagreement; but the disputing philosophical orientations have their counterparts in the other religions. Thus some Muslims are more likely to agree with Jews or Christians on a given religio-philosophical issue (like predestination, or how to understand God's action in the world) than they are with fellow Muslims (see Griffith-Dickson 2005). But the reason for this philosophical solidarity might have less to do with a supposed perennial philosophy, and more to do with certain specific circumstances. They might hold similar doctrines (such as monotheism) which, for logical reasons, give rise to the same kinds of philosophical problems when laid out against the tragedies of life (giving rise, say, to the famous problem of evil). This could be even more telling when both monotheisms collide with the same secular philosophy, such as ancient

Greek philosophy. They will display the same stress pattern, as it were. But, above all, the similarities have developed quite simply because they influenced each other.

So conventional views of philosophy of religion as grounding or disrupting the faith claims of a given theism at best can only capture one item in its job description. The true story of a theism's philosophical history is a story that is falsified if you write the other theisms out of the script. This is not to say that a multicultural or comparative approach to studying philosophy of religion is the way to learn about a given religion as a whole. "Philosophy of religion" is not the same thing as "theism" and studying philosophy of religion is not the way to understand a whole religious tradition, let alone several all at once. If you want to understand a country, in all its noisy, smelly, colorful complexity, you need to go there. If you want to understand a problem, however, do not just visit one country and study its solutions. The problem might not be identical in the different countries you visit, but so much the better; as your experience, analysis and imagination will be all the richer. In the same way, the enterprise of philosophy of religion is richer, more deeply understood, and ultimately more satisfying when it can embrace more than one religious tradition in its analysis of the problems of theism.

The Interpenetration of Philosophy and Theism

Therefore, we need a more complex understanding of the relationship between theism and philosophy of religion than seeing it as the disciplinary method—or "hand-maiden"—for theology or theism. That will not only help us to understand their relationship better but also to understand better what each of them *is*; for philosophy of religion and theism have created each other through history.

Once you become alive to the long history of interaction between philosophical thinking and vibrant, living religions, you can no longer see theism as the passive object of the philosopher's study; or philosophy as merely the toolkit to shore up or take apart theism. Historically their relationship arises from the collision of the two phenomena in a multicultural setting: the collision being between the complex set of beliefs, practices and customs summed up as a "religion" or "theism," and a group of people thinking about similar things in a particular stylistic way. Thus mature Judaism, then infant Christianity, met with Greek philosophy in a pre-existing multicultural context. Islam, once it came of age some centuries later, recreated the duet in a different key.

In contrast, South Asian philosophy of religion is, in many ways, a commentarial tradition; of continuous rigorous philosophical engagement above all with particular texts, whether Vedas or Tantras. The endless fertility of this story of clarifying insights results in numerous philosophical systems, both theistic and non-theistic. This cornucopia is not unified or rationalized by any single authority figure or a single authoritative text. As a result the Indian religious-philosophical systems have more numerous and diverse schools of disciplined reflection, practice and histories of community than those anywhere else (see King 1999 for a good introduction to the various systems).

One Ariadne's thread in the Asian traditions, however, is the metaphysical question of the unity or diversity of reality: is all that is one or many? Are the multitude of things we perceive but aspects or reflections of the same unified existence, or are they as irreducibly different as they appear? The variety of answers to this question yield fundamentally different philosophical approaches; and, interestingly, these *philosophical* approaches are intertwined with different approaches to theism. They are traditionally classified as those that assert metaphysical difference (there are lots of different beings

in the world and they are, really, different); those that maintain that there is a fundamental identity to all things (beings all look different yet they are but aspects of one unified reality, being, Self); and those that maintain the reality of both, seeing difference as ultimately grounded in identity. The great philosopher Śaṅkara of the Advaita Vedānta school expounded the view that the One that all reality is, Brahman, pure consciousness, is the Self of all of us. The philosopher Madhva, in contrast, maintains that difference is real, and we, the individual selves and the world, are different from God; his stance has an essentially realist flavor. Meanwhile the two positions are mediated by Rāmānuja; who would agree with Śaṅkara that the absolute has the nature of consciousness, and is the foundation of all, but insist that Ultimate Reality is a personal Lord, and our apparently individual existence is not illusory.

Lest this paint too serene a picture, South Asian philosophy was the home of vigorous debate. One such was the intellectual war, over a period of centuries, between a particular group of Indian theists, philosophers in the Nyāya tradition, and Buddhists over the arguments for the existence of God. Nyāya theistic philosophy developed an argument for God as the cause of the universe which was not dissimilar to familiar Western versions. They evolved first through a rich commentarial stream on the *Nyāya Sūtras*' pithy and redolent utterances from Gautama (not the same Gautama as the Buddha) on God's causality in contrast to the fruitlessness of human action. These were refined into a more formally structured argument about God's creation of the world. Non-theistic Hindus and Buddhists launched their missiles; the former, for example, arguing for a non-divine origin to the universe found in primal matter and atoms. The Buddhists, meanwhile, were particularly agile in attacking the concepts of causality and the supposed quality of "being an effect" that was said to characterize the world; which had the effect of stimulating the Nyāya thinkers to ever more sophisticated versions of the argument. (This debate took place over the centuries of the first millennium of the "Common Era" as measured in the West. See the contribution of Matthew Dasti, Chapter 2 in this volume.)

This little snapshot, taken as an example, shows us that the duel between theisms and their contemporary atheisms are neither new nor particularly "Western" (as some modern public figures might suppose). More than that, we can see that the various religious traditions and philosophies have been rubbing shoulders and setting to work on each other's texts and arguments throughout history. More interesting still: it demonstrates that this is how the theists raised their game.

Meanwhile, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all came into existence as faith traditions anchored in sacred revealed texts, and they developed a range of intellectual disciplines to equip themselves: scriptural, legal, theological, and so on. Their milieu, which was already multi-religious, surrounded them with rival systems of thought; and they did not refuse this interaction for long. Historically—for they were all born in the same region and each watched the latest new birth grow up—it was the same philosophical culture that shaped all three (see Harrison 2007). First and foremost, it was Greek philosophy they met, already bearing within it an existing ideological divide: Plato (more accurately, neo-Platonism) vs. Aristotle.

Neo-Platonism (associated above all with Plotinus of Alexandria as well as Porphyry of Phoenicia) spoke of a God above all beings, perhaps beyond all Being, from whom originates everything that is in a dazzling succession of emanations (see Plotinus of Alexandria 1991 (250 CE); and Porphyry of Phoenicia 1988 (third century CE)). Aristotelianism, meanwhile, described a world, co-eternal with its Creator, containing entities that bear potential within themselves and long for their actualization; pulled into

motion by an Unmoved Mover (or better translated as an Unchanging Changer) who draws all things towards their actualization and perfection. Both these “philosophies” are of course “theisms” themselves, with dramatically different depictions of God, even if they agree on the formal attributes (infinite, unchanging, omnipotent and omniscient): the one a dynamism from on high cascading Being down through an unbroken chain; the other a drive from below to above, as all things, moved by love of the Unchanging Changer, desire and achieve their perfection. Along with these concepts of God, the young theisms (in Judaism, Christianity and Islam) adopted the Platonic or Aristotelian stances on metaphysics, epistemology, substance and accident, categories, logic, analysis of the essence and existence of humanity, ethics and political reflection—all the materials that comprise a system of philosophy.

First off the mark was Judaism in its Hellenist period, in the person of the Alexandrian thinker Philo, who reflected on the Hebrew Scriptures using the framework of Greek philosophy. Then Jewish philosophy subsided and Christianity took up the baton; using Greek concepts (person, substance, essence, being) to define and decide its Christological debates and articulate the concept of the Trinity. Christian thinkers not only borrowed the Greek toolkit for their theological perplexities; they ventured into the terrain of the philosopher’s arguments. Thus John Philoponus, for example, versed in the arguments of Plato and Aristotle for the existence of God, baptized their strategies and tactics and introduced them into the discussions of early Christendom (see Sorabji 1983).

The neo-Platonism of Plotinus and the arguments from Philoponus were ready to hand for the Islamic philosophers when they got into their stride, self-consciously differentiating themselves from the Islamic theologians (see Fakhry 1970). But marrying Islamic teaching with the everyday tools of logic is one thing. Synchronizing the revelation of the Qur’an with the emanations of neo-Platonism or the lurings of the Unchanging Changer, on the other hand, is a real creative challenge; yet the philosophers labored undeterred by the outspoken disapproval of their theological brethren. Islamic neo-Platonism attained the level of genius in Ibn Sina (Avicenna), was ambushed by the sarcastic anti-philosophical brilliance of al-Ghazali (Algazel), and was finally stabbed in the back by the greatest of Islamic Aristotelians Ibn Rushd (Averroes)—a passionate defender of philosophy but, precisely for that reason, a cynic towards the wilder shores of emanation theologies. His defense of philosophy against the theologians obliged him to no solidarity with neo-Platonism; rather, a robust case was to be made for Aristotle as the foundation for philosophy. But such was the success of al-Ghazali’s skeptical attack that even Ibn Rushd’s restrained Aristotelianism was a more powerful immediate influence on Christian than subsequent Islamic philosophy.

Jewish philosophy stirred to life again in the medieval period, heavily indebted to Islamic philosophy and often, in fact, written in Arabic. At this point in history Jewish thinkers were more intimately engaged with their Islamic than their Christian rivals, for both geographical and linguistic reasons; and they fell into the same two camps: neo-Platonist (Isaac Israeli, Solomon Ibn Gabirol, Bahya Ibn Pakuda, Joseph Ibn Saddiq) or Aristotelian (Abraham Ibn Daud, and most famously Moses ben Maimon or Maimonides). The same fundamental tendencies of Plato vs. Aristotle, dreamy speculative rationalism or more gritty empiricism, characterize the development of medieval Christian philosophy as well.

What is clear from this segment of history is that the philosophies are as divergent and fractious as the religions; but just as the theisms have been shaped and transformed

by philosophical reflection, so too have the philosophies been indebted to the religions, even at times for survival. “Pagan” Greek philosophy long outlived belief in Zeus and Aphrodite by being absorbed and reborn in Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

The legacy of Platonism *contra* Aristotle lived on in the West in an enduring divide between a predilection for pure or purist reason vs. a delight in empiricism or sense experience—one reason why the simplistic “faith vs. reason” slogan does not do justice to the complexities of philosophy. This dualism of senses and reason carves the Enlightenment in two (see Beiser 1987). In the nineteenth century, speculative rationalism and idealism developed unstoppable momentum in Hegel and German philosophy, while (particularly in Britain) empiricism gained strength from the confidence and capabilities of natural science. The advances in logic (which had not been massively rethought since Aristotle) came with the German Gottlob Frege in the nineteenth century and Bertrand Russell in the twentieth. At the same time a traditional medieval interest in interpretation (starting from the need to analyze how religious, and thereafter legal, texts should be interpreted reliably) blossomed and migrated from religious and literary disciplines into the social sciences as their characteristic methodology; bringing with it a renewed interest in the philosophy of language.

From the Enlightenment onwards in Europe, the history of the theisms’ philosophizing is inseparable from the history of philosophy itself—as done by individual Christians or Jews, by Muslims and Hindus and others living in the West or reading its texts. “Theistic” philosophy is empiricist or rationalist or anti-rationalist; Kantian, Hegelian, neo-Kantian or Marxist; existentialist, phenomenological, Husserlian or Heideggerian; positivist or analytic; personalist, hermeneutical or post-modern. Each of these fads has drawn in the theist and the atheist alike, and suffused philosophy of religion just as the rest of philosophy. The interaction of philosophy of religion and theism in Europe since the Enlightenment is a story that can only be told accurately with a survey of its individual thinkers (for just such a survey see Oppy and Trakakis 2009).

Arguably the present divide in English-speaking philosophy of religion as it deals with theism is not “theist” or “atheist,” but “analytic” vs. “continental” (for a discussion of this latter divide, see Trakakis 2008). These designations label, respectively, those working in a particular Anglo-American style, largely empiricist or positivist, or pragmatist, and with a focus on the analysis of concepts, language and argument; as opposed to a style of writing associated with Continental Europe and a focus on existence, lived experience and interpretation. Both, for example, would claim they make use of “experience” in philosophy; but does “experience” mean collecting sense data or is it a lived interpretation of the world? Needless to say this divide doesn’t identify the Christian from the Jew or the Sikh from the Muslim. It flags up a *philosophical* temperament that plays out in whatever theism they choose to study.

In its own way the Plato–Aristotle legacy lives on in the history of Islamic philosophy as well, differently manifested. In the Shi’a tradition in particular, we see Ayatollah Mutahhari arguing that Islamic philosophy is divided into the camps of the “peripatetics” (Aristotelians) and the “illuminationists” (those with a post-neo-Platonist, quasi-mystical bent) (see Mutahhari 2002: 20). In his analysis, the “illuminationists” believe that the heart and purification of the soul are necessary for addressing philosophical questions, above all when questions of divine wisdom are concerned; whereas peripatetics believe that philosophy remains a matter of deduction alone. It should be added that for the last two centuries Islamic thinkers, both Shi’a and Sunni, have engaged with “secular” philosophies of the West as well as the East, not least with Marxism and political

and economic theory, but also with hermeneutics and other developments in Western philosophy.

Interfaith Philosophy of Religion

Draw the conclusions you wish; but even if “comparative philosophy” is an emerging discipline in the Western context after the religious monoculture of recent decades, it is clear that philosophy of religion conducted in an interfaith context is not a new enterprise. Philosophers have read each other’s work from outside their culture or religion for millennia. This activity is *tidal*. Neither new nor old, nor constant, nor evolving in steady progress from lesser to greater nor regressing either; it ebbs and flows, pulled by political riptides, social currents and economic undertow. Far from post-modern, avant garde, or even just liberal, cross-religious philosophy of religion is actually a thoroughly *traditional* philosophical activity.

It also suggests that one rumor will have to be quashed. Some late twentieth-century philosophers of religion (or critics of religion) promulgated the notion that, in our post-modern age of jet travel, our increasing awareness of other religions introduced a new challenge to religious belief. The fact that there are other religions believing something different has reduced the credibility of all of them, we are told; they are like witnesses in a court all contradicting each other, leading the jury to suppose them all to be lying. In fact, something very different seems to be the case when we widen our scope to include the historical evidence. The intimate co-existence of different faiths is not some modern phenomenon. Religions have been around for millennia occupying the same habitats. Religions are aware of other religions from their birth—from the emergence of Christianity from Judaism, from the revelation of Islam. They evolve together and in interaction, even when that interaction is competitive or actively hostile. Religious people have noticed they did not agree and have been arguing about it for at least two thousand years.

What is shaken is the conviction that religious commitments are unassailable on the basis of authority alone, whether institutional or scriptural. Allusions to texts and ecclesial authorities do not win the argument with other faiths. So religious thinkers—or religious “talkers”—also needed to develop strategies for coping with others who challenged the everyday foundations of their own certainty. This should lead us to think another unconventional thought: this process is not really about knowledge or epistemology. Ultimately the challenge of religious diversity for philosophical theism is a problem about intercultural and social relationships. Is it really *concepts and claims* or is it *groups and speakers* in religious conflict?

The impact of religious diversity on the evolution of both philosophy of religion and theism is about the challenge of finding ways of speaking together. Religious authority (whether of scriptures or scholars) will not suffice, if it ever did. Instead the aim is to strive for ways of thinking, speaking and negotiating the issues of theism in a way that transcends the various particularities of each tradition.

Contribution to Intellectual Culture

Against this backdrop, philosophy of religion can be seen as *democratizing* intelligent debate about religion and implicitly redefining what authority consists in. One description of philosophy of religion which might distinguish it from “theology,” say, is that philosophers of religion discuss these issues with people who are likely to disagree on any one of their most fundamental and passionate beliefs (e.g., the belief that God does or

does not exist and the belief that religion is or is not of value). In philosophy of religion, therefore, the conversation takes place (or can take place) within a broader constituency than that of scripture, scholars, or systematic theologians, who write for opponents who are nevertheless “fellow Christians,” or indeed maybe “fellow Catholics” or “fellow Lutherans.” They can assume a certain shared value system and recognized authorities, even if these are ill-defined and arguable. Christian philosophers of religion, however, are likely to imagine their work being read by peers and colleagues who are atheists. Therefore, to convince, to be understood or even to be thought interesting, one must recognize a more limited area of shared agreement. Philosophers of religion who are Western Christians, for example, steer clear of invoking the Bible, a text by Luther, or a document from the Second Vatican Council; for it proves nothing to an atheistic colleague. What any successful or convincing philosopher or theologian must appeal to in persuasion is shared experience, and for the philosopher of religion this is in one sense broader and in another sense narrower, than it is for most theologians. Broader, because it addresses people of any belief or none, but narrower because it therefore cannot make use of any shared *religious* experience and confines itself to more general experience and logic; both of which, for different reasons, can be uncontroversial.

The heart of the philosophy of religion enterprise then is *relational* and *dialectical* or *dialogical*. It is the bath-house where theisms can gossip and squabble about their neighborly quarrels. It is the marketplace where a theism borrows or trades ideas and answers from other theisms. It is the coffee-house where atheisms can ambush theisms through the lure of a shared shisha pipe.

Once religions are seen not only in their own context but also in others, aligned uncomfortably alongside one another or a “secular” philosophy, new intellectual sciences are needed in order fully to understand them. A whole new standard of what it means to “understand” a religion, in fact, is what emerges. Not *emic* but *etic*, as the social sciences would say; not a “scholarly while faithful” insider’s perspective, but rather a view that cannot take so much for granted. Its job is to understand what a theism means in the context of challenges from *another perspective*.

The philosophy of religion enterprise, therefore, is also at the interface between theism and the rest of intellectual culture, because it does not balance on claims which cannot be fathomed by colleagues such as literary critics, medical researchers, or evolutionary psychologists. Indeed philosophy of religion has a valuable role to play when such colleagues (especially the latter) seek to re-describe the significance of the phenomenon of religion; for, like atheism whether “New” or old, such attempts must also be challenged with regard to the rigor of their analysis and the empirical or logical grounds for their claims and assertions.

So philosophy of religion can be reconceived as the place for critical dialogue with those who differ fundamentally from ourselves, which is an ancient conception and one we are in danger of losing. It will never outgrow its perennial questions: what is God(s)? What are we? What is knowledge or being? Why is there evil and what is the good thing to do? How can we know the Unfathomable and articulate the Ineffable? And most important of all: how can we prove we are *right*?

But as belief in God confronts each new crisis in human history, it will spawn new controversies for theism. And as it has for two thousand years, philosophy will be hovering, to help and heckle. And in the haggling, as ever, it will expose the common ground that fragments faiths and the conflicts that unite them.

Related Topics

Chapter 1: Western Philosophy; Chapter 2: Asian Philosophy; Chapter 19: Philosophical Methodology; Chapter 28: Arguments from Evil; Chapter 29: Religious Experience; Chapter 30: Arguments About Human Persons; Chapter 36: Religious Diversity

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HISTORICAL INQUIRY

Lydia McGrew

The question of the relation of history to theism is, in no small part, the question of the relation of history to miracles. Whether or not the hand of Divine Providence can be seen in the broad sweep of history or in the historical facts of man's search for God, it is in specific miracles that we can see most clearly, if we can see at all, that God is active in human affairs.

The position that miracles cannot be investigated by the historian is associated first and foremost with the names of Ernst Troeltsch and F. H. Bradley, who argued that the very condition for the possibility of historical inquiry—the assumption of exceptionless physical law—makes the admission of a miracle by an historian untenable. I shall not have much to say here about the Troeltschian view, especially as it has been dealt with by so many others and with particular care by J. Houston (1994: 66ff. and 191ff.).

There are other distinctively epistemic objections, besides the Troeltschian one, to historical investigation of miracles. On the theological side, we have those who insist that miracles are matters of faith and that, while one might legitimately believe that they have happened, one can do so only in some role other than that of historian. On the philosophical and probabilistic side, it can be argued that the immense differences between God and man make it impossible to use rational means of investigation to draw the conclusion that a theistic hypothesis is the best explanation for some event.

Both of these epistemic positions, however, require the Christian theist to hypothesize a God who is unable to manifest himself unmistakably in the world. Since the God of traditional Christian theism is able thus to manifest himself, the theist ought to be permitted to test the explanatory force of the hypothesis he is actually interested in, unless that hypothesis can be shown to be incoherent. The position that we cannot rationally detect God's action in history can thus be said to be question-begging against traditional Christian theism, since it rules out *ab initio* the very form of theism the traditional Christian theist wishes to argue for.

Demarcationism and Worldview Relativism

It would be space-consuming and tedious to survey the many theologians and New Testament scholars who have opined that miracles cannot be the subject of direct historical investigation. While anyone claiming to be in any sense an orthodox Christian cannot take the Troeltschian position that the historian must rule out the occurrence of miracles *a priori*, an epistemic cognate of that position holds that the historian *qua* historian works with empirical data while the theologian or philosopher is permitted to

transcend that data and draw conclusions which mere reason and evidence could not reach. Thus the “scientific” realm of history is kept clean of any taint of the ostensibly more subjective judgment that a miracle has occurred.

Theologian George Hunsinger’s statement is typical:

Christ’s resurrection could theoretically be disproved by historical evidence, but it could not be proven on historical grounds alone, because, in the nature of the case, it confronts us with something more than a merely historical claim—something much more terrifying and radical. . . . Affirming or denying Christ’s resurrection—or better, affirming or denying the Risen Christ—is well beyond the competency of mere reason. . . . The Christian faith is far more a matter of radical conversion than it is of rational persuasion. The claim that a marginal Jew who was put to death on a cross should have been raised from the dead so that he now reigns as Lord and Savior is never going to be plausible to rational or evidential considerations.

(Hunsinger 2010)

The reference to a “marginal Jew” is an allusion to John Meier’s massive work by that same title, and Hunsinger’s position on history and miracles is much like the position discussed at greater length by Meier, who declares that

the historian can ascertain whether an extraordinary event has taken place in a religious setting, whether someone has claimed it to be a miracle, and—if there is enough evidence—whether a human action, physical forces in the universe, misperception, illusion, or fraud can explain the event. If all these explanations are excluded, the historian may conclude that an event claimed by some people to be miraculous has no reasonable explanation or adequate cause in any human activity or physical force. To go beyond that judgment and to affirm *either* that God has directly acted to bring about this startling event *or* that God has not done so is to go beyond what any historian can affirm in his . . . capacity as a historian and to enter the domain of philosophy or theology.

(Meier 1994: 514–15)

Meier repeats this same point emphatically in the pages surrounding this quotation, and at times it seems that he is merely making a rather pedantic demarcationist claim with no argument behind it beyond a desire for a tidy taxonomy of disciplines. Matters become clearer, however, when we see the following:

The atheist’s judgment [that a miracle has not occurred] may be as firm and sincere as the believer’s; *it is also just as much a philosophical or theological judgment determined by a particular worldview*, and not a judgment that arises simply, solely, and necessarily out of an examination of the evidence of this particular case.

(Meier 1994: 514, emphasis added)

And there is also this:

As G. F. Woods . . . observes, “the evidential value of the miraculous is closely interwoven with the metaphysical views of those to whom the evidence is

offered. . . . the weighing of historical evidence is affected by the metaphysical presuppositions of those who weigh the evidence. *There are no metaphysically neutral scales.*"

(Meier 1994: 527, n. 17, emphasis added)

It is, in other words, a kind of epistemic relativism that is doing the work in Meier's demarcationism. The wall of separation Meier posits separates the neutral and objective investigations of the historian from the supposedly worldview-determined conclusions of the philosopher or theologian. Dale Allison takes a similar position when he says: "It is our worldview that interprets the textual data, not the textual data that determines our worldview" (Allison 2005: 342).

A Christian who objects to an arbitrarily bifurcated mental universe will not appreciate the implication that his Christianity is the result of a leap of faith beyond the evidence, even if the theologians assure him that worldview subjectivism is both unavoidable and legitimate. But a further, fundamental theological problem with the separation between the discipline of history and the miraculous concerns the very concept of God in traditional theism, a concept that is incompatible with demarcationist views such as Meier's.

Miracles As Public Signs

The nineteenth-century Dominican Henri Lacordaire ridiculed the deistical view of God thus:

That is to say, gentlemen, that it is impossible for God to manifest himself by the single act which publicly and instantaneously announces his presence, by the act of sovereignty. While the lowest in the scale of being has the right to appear in the bosom of nature by the exercise of its proper force, . . . to God alone it should be denied to manifest his force in the personal measure that distinguishes him and makes him a separate being! . . . God can no longer act, appear, communicate himself. That is denied to him.

(Hazeltine et al. 1905: 5858)

Lacordaire, here, emphasizes the importance of a miracle as a sign, a public, manifest indication to mankind that God exists and is acting in the world. It has been central to Christianity from biblical times that God does thus manifest himself and that we are able, by these manifestations, to know more about God than we otherwise could know. John, in his first epistle, is particularly insistent on the point:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life. (For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us.)

(I John 1:1–2)

In John's Gospel, the account of the miracle at Cana has this postscript: "This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth his glory; and his

disciples believed on him" (John 2:11). Nicodemus puts the point succinctly: "Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him" (John 3:2). And Jesus makes a similar point when he urges his disciples to "believe me for the works' sake" (John 14:11).

Nor does this emphasis seem at all unreasonable, for it is worth asking how God *could* verify a new revelation to man except by a miracle. A private vision or feeling, which could be interpreted in multiple ways and the veracity of which could be doubted by others, would not show mankind generally that a particular teaching is from God, especially if it were not even indirectly related to some more publicly verifiable miracle. When Moses protests (Exodus 4) that the people will not believe that he has been sent from God to deliver them, God does not respond by telling Moses that the people must consult the *sensus divinitatis* nor that God can be known only by those who are willing and able to see with the eyes of faith. Instead, he gives Moses the power to perform signs immediately, and the plagues of Egypt and the parting of the Red Sea are further signs to the children of Israel that God is leading them. When God gives the Ten Commandments, he identifies himself as a particular God with a particular character by reference to his acts in the world: "I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Exodus 20:2).

While theologians and New Testament scholars who deny the possibility of historical investigation of miracles need not be, and often are not, deists, they deny no less than do deists the ability of God to manifest himself publicly by way of signs. That is to say that they deny the main purpose of miracles as taught in Scripture and Christian tradition.

We can see this point clearly if we consider David Hume's ironic conclusion to "Of Miracles":

I am the better pleased with the method of reasoning here delivered, as I think it may serve to confound those dangerous friends or disguised enemies to the Christian Religion, who have undertaken to defend it by the principles of human reason. Our most holy religion is founded on Faith, not on reason; and it is a sure method of exposing it to put it to such a trial as it is, by no means, fitted to endure. . . . So that, upon the whole, we may conclude, that the Christian Religion not only was at first attended with miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one. Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity: and whoever is moved by Faith to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience.

(Hume 1748: 98f.)

Hume, here, asserts that, since miracles cannot be recognized by human reason, they can be accepted only by an on-going, internal work of God in the heart of individuals to make them believe irrationally. Hume does not say, though he might have done so, that if God must continually work in the hearts of individuals to make them willing to believe in him and his truth against reason, there is no point in his doing external miracles in the first place. If such an on-going, individual work is necessary and is consistent with God's character and intentions for human salvation, people could similarly be moved and inspired by the Holy Ghost, against reason, to believe in the Trinity, the

forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting while contemplating a sunset or a flower.

A miracle that is irrational to believe in is the miracle of a hidden God, not of a God manifesting himself. God could, of course, perform all sorts of pointless, hidden miracles. He could rearrange the molecules in a wall in such a way that someone using the room could not detect the rearrangement. But such a miracle, precisely because no one would have any reason to believe in it, would teach us nothing. It could not verify a revelation. It could not tell us that a teacher was come from God. It could not tell us that God is acting in the world. It would have no point. Similarly, if the traditional Christian miracles are signs, they are signs precisely because and insofar as we *have reason to believe that they actually happened*. If we must be irrational to believe in them, then they are not signs but merely pointless exercises of Divine power which God arbitrarily chooses to use as an opportunity to overcome our rational faculties and to inspire us, on a private, individual basis, to believe theological doctrines. All of which is patently absurd from the perspective of Christian orthodoxy, which is, of course, the point of Hume's insinuations. We should be false friends to Christianity, indeed, if we concurred with Hume on this point.

The devastating consequences of privatizing belief in God's actions are particularly evident in the "objective vision" theory of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. On this view, the resurrected Jesus was not physically present to his disciples in the world of space and time and hence was visible only by special Divine enablement. Peter Carnley makes the apologetic loss in the objective vision theory strikingly evident when he compares it to the theory that the witnesses had merely psychogenic visions, for which the less polite term is "hallucinations." Carnley asks,

If one is relying on the evidence of the appearances to provide the historical ground of faith, then, in strictly historical terms, where is the evidence to come from to rule out the possibility of psychologically induced visions as one explanation of the available evidence?

(Carnley 1997: 35)

There are answers to Carnley's question about grounds for ruling out subjective visions. One could, for example, refer to the details of the disciples' reports, such as Jesus' tangibility and his ability to eat. Most important of all, the disciples claimed that Jesus' appearances were intersubjectively verifiable. But if an objective vision theorist were to use these data to answer Carnley, he would undermine his own hypothesis, for the very details that argue against hallucinations also argue for the physically literal presence of Jesus and for the physical nature of interactions with him.

It is, in fact, because Meier (1991: 201, n. 2; 1994: 529, n. 24) evidently accepts the objective vision theory that he does not seem to consider the resurrection to be a miracle at all, for one of his criteria for a miracle is that its results must be perceptible by any fair-minded observer (Meier 1994: 512). But there is something interestingly arbitrary about this requirement for a miracle given Meier's own relativistic approach. What point is there in empirical, public accessibility for the results of miracles if the final decision as to whether a miracle has taken place is merely a matter of one's worldview? If the evidence *cannot* lead one rationally to conclude that the best explanation is the intervention of God, and if it is nevertheless legitimate for the theologian or philosopher to apply a worldview to the situation in order to leap to that conclusion, it is

difficult to see why the theologian or philosopher requires empirical evidence at all, or what distinctively epistemic role empirical evidence is supposed to play.

Here it might seem that I am overstating the case. It is, someone might point out, possible for evidence to play *some* rational role without being conclusive. The distinction between an argument that provides some confirmation of an hypothesis and an argument that provides sufficient confirmation for belief is an important one. Whether one's criterion for belief is that a proposition be more probable than .5 or more probable than some other, higher cut-off, one can obviously have some evidence for a proposition which is partly or entirely outweighed, leading to a reasonable position of continued disbelief, agnosticism or, at most, weakly positive credence. Perhaps those who wish to relegate the final conclusion that a miracle has taken place to a special "worldview applications" realm tenanted by philosophers and theologians but not by historians, should say that historical evidence can be, to some degree, positively relevant to the conclusion that a miracle has happened but can never justify that conclusion. (This appears to be the position taken by Hunsinger.)

The trouble with this line of thought is that it is utterly unsupported by any defensible epistemological principle. If evidence can rationally confirm a proposition, it is always *in principle* possible that there should be a sufficient amount of evidence to make it rational to believe the proposition and even irrational to disbelieve it. Conversely, if evidence can never, in the nature of the case, make it rational to believe a proposition, if that proposition can be believed only by a sort of "faith" that goes beyond evidence, then evidence must not be able rationally to confirm that proposition. There is no principled reason to permit ordinary epistemic confirmation for a miracle claim only to some weak level and then to declare that, however much evidence we receive, it can never confirm the conclusion past that point. Confirmation is confirmation and is all of a piece.

If evidence is not able to confirm the action of God in a miracle, then the miracle is not a sign at all but merely a cipher placed mysteriously in the world to be decoded by the arbitrary and magical acts of the Holy Spirit upon the minds and hearts of individual men who cannot otherwise see what God is doing, or indeed that God is doing anything at all.

Thus the *a priori* position that miracles cannot be historically investigated turns out, perhaps surprisingly, to be question-begging against traditional theism. For traditional theism holds not only that God can *do* miracles but also that man can *recognize* miracles—without which recognition a miracle would have no revelatory purpose.

Sober's Theological Skepticism and Historical Miracles

It might seem that the foregoing argument will be of interest solely to Christian theologians. Why should a non-Christian philosopher care whether or not John Meier's view of miracles and history is compatible with the traditional Christian idea that miracles are used by God as public signs? But the idea that it is impossible for us rationally to conclude that God has acted in the world is by no means the exclusive province of theologians, nor is dogmatic demarcationism between history and theology its only manifestation. Philosopher of science Elliott Sober does not deal directly with the question of historical miracles, since his arguments are made in the context of the debate over intelligent design in biology. But Sober does insist on a radical separation between the acts of God (if God were to exist) and what Sober considers to be the normal, rational method of scientific investigation—the comparison of the probability of evidence on competing explanatory theories.

Sober presents his opponents, tacitly, with a dilemma—either the theistic hypothesis is completely uninformative about the evidence (and therefore cannot be the best explanation of the evidence) or it is *ad hoc*.

The problem is that the design hypothesis confers a probability on the observation only when it is supplemented with further assumptions about what the designer's goals and abilities would be if he existed. . . . There are as many likelihoods as there are suppositions concerning the goals and abilities of the putative designer. Which of these, or which class of these, should we take seriously?

It is no good answering this question by assuming that the eye was built by an intelligent designer and then inferring that the designer must have wanted to give the eye features $F_1 \dots F_n$ and must have had the ability to do so since, after all, these are the features we observe. For one thing, this pattern of argument is question-begging. One needs independent evidence as to what the designer's plans and abilities would be if he existed. . . .

This objection to the design argument is . . . continuous with the precepts of "negative theology," which holds that God is so different from us and the world we already know about that it is impossible for us to have much of a grasp of what his characteristics are. . . . We are invited . . . to imagine a designer who is radically different from the human craftsmen we know about. But if this designer is so different, why are we so sure that this being would build the vertebrate eye in the form in which we find it?

(Sober 2007: 10f.)

Just before this passage, Sober merely says that we need to have "an argument that shows that this probability [that design gives to the observation] is indeed higher than the probability that Chance confers on the observation." But elsewhere, his demands are less modest. Sober's approach involves making a clear separation between a "main hypothesis"—for example, that God exists—and "auxiliary assumptions," which he says in theistic design inferences must be assumptions about what God's goals and abilities would be if he existed. (Sober focuses most on the problem of knowing God's goals, since he acknowledges (2007: 13) that the God of traditional theism is usually assumed to be omnipotent.) Repeatedly, Sober claims that one must have independent, solid support for these auxiliaries. Just a few pages after the more modest characterization of his requirement, he ups the ante, implying that we must be able to "justify [auxiliary assumptions] independently" (Sober 2007: 13). Elsewhere he endorses as normal scientific practice the use of auxiliary assumptions that scientists "already have good reason to think are true" (Sober 1999: 54). He also characterizes his position as "the demand that one have independent reason to think that one's auxiliary assumptions are true" (Sober 1999: 57). Sober further says that "testing the design hypothesis requires that we have information about the goals and abilities the designer would have, if he existed" (Sober 1999: 54), and, in his most recent work on the subject, he states that one hypothesis can be tested against another only if there exist true auxiliary assumptions which we are "now justified in believing" (Sober 2008: 152). These are very strong requirements for independently justified information about the Divine mind.

There are indeed states of affairs that cannot be used as arguments for miracles because there is no more reason to expect them to come about miraculously than non-miraculously. If, for example, a state of affairs were apparently utterly trivial or insignificant,

such as a seemingly pointless particular arrangement of molecules in the wood grain of a table, we would not be able to make a case for a miracle by noting the specifics of that arrangement. It would be possible that God had some unknown reason for intervening to make the molecules come out in just that wood grain pattern, but absent any evidence on the matter, we should plausibly either not assign any probability at all to that state of affairs given Divine intervention or at least regard the probability as being no higher than if only natural causes were at work.

Or consider the case of a lottery. Suppose that we know nothing particular about the religious beliefs or activities of any of the ticket-holders. If an omnipotent God wished Bill to win the lottery, of course God would cause Bill to win. But Bill's winning the lottery is not evidence that God intervened miraculously in the lottery, for the hypothesis "God intervenes in the lottery" gives (because of our lack of any special information) equal probability to God's intervening on behalf of Bill and on behalf of each other participant. Hence, for some n participants, the probability of Bill's winning given Divine intervention is $1/n$, which is the same as the probability of Bill's winning given no Divine intervention, and there is no confirmation for a miracle.

But the requirement of *justified* auxiliaries regarding God's goals to supplement the theistic hypothesis is far too strong, if the concern is merely to make the theistic hypothesis probabilistically non-vacuous. It would be sufficient merely to say that the theistic hypothesis must not be totally uninformative about the probability of the evidence or, even more modestly, that we must have some way of getting a grip on the comparative probability of the evidence given the theistic hypothesis and its rivals.

Sober's *ad hoc* concern regarding theistic hypotheses is especially evident when he considers the possibility of investigating specific design hypotheses that incorporate the goals and abilities of a designer. Counters Sober:

[This] is a game that two can play. Consider the hypothesis that the vertebrate eye was created by the mindless process of electricity. If I simply get to invent auxiliary hypotheses without having to justify them independently, I can simply stipulate the following assumption—if electricity created the vertebrate eye, the eye must have features $F_1 \dots F_n$. The electricity hypothesis now is a conjunct in a conjunction that has maximum likelihood, just like the design hypothesis. This is a dead end.

(Sober 2007: 13)

But while Sober might fear that any theistic hypothesis or design hypothesis will be either entirely uninformative or demonstrably *ad hoc*, he has certainly not come close to showing that it *must always* be so, nor that it must be so absent independently justified auxiliary hypotheses about Divine goals. A mere reference to negative theology and to God's being very different from human beings is a weak basis indeed for such a robust conclusion.

The distinction between testing auxiliaries and testing the main hypothesis is, in any event, far from being as cut and dried a matter as one might gather from Sober's discussion. On the contrary, it has been a vexed issue and the subject of much technical discussion (see, for example, Strevens 2001; Dorling 1982). It is rather puzzling, given the controversy in this area, that Sober should choose to place so much weight on the use only of auxiliaries that are so far beyond question that surprising results will never be attributed to their falsehood. It is arbitrary to subject theistic hypotheses to such a

requirement when it is difficult to be sure one is satisfying that requirement even when doing science within a framework of methodological naturalism.

Moreover, in the case of agent action, the separation between a “main” theory—that the agent exists—and “auxiliaries” regarding the agent’s goals and abilities is especially artificial. The possibility of a well-confirmed conclusion regarding agent action which does not appear to be *ad hoc*, without the presence of previously well-justified auxiliaries of the kind Sober is looking for in the theistic case, is evident from everyday examples. Suppose that I have never heard of such a person as Madeleine Flannagan, a New Zealand law student with an interest in philosophy. While it might be difficult to pin down exactly how low the prior probability of her existence is under those circumstances, it is presumably quite low, given the specificity of the hypothesis. Moreover, I do not have good reason to think that if such a person existed, she would desire and attempt to make contact with me. It is not as though most of the people in the world with an interest in philosophy try to make contact with me. If I could even put a probability on the proposition “If Madeleine Flannagan, a New Zealand law student with an interest in philosophy, existed, she would wish to make contact with me,” it would be quite a low one. That “auxiliary” concerning her goals would not be a justified belief, nor anything close to a justified belief. Nor do I have any other justified beliefs about what her goals would be, relative to the question of her making contact with me. But one day, I find an e-mail in my inbox purporting to be from a person by that very name and description, asking for a copy of a paper of mine that she has heard about. Do I have any problem with considering this to be evidence for the highly specific hypothesis that she both exists and wishes to make contact with me? Is there any need for me to separate that hypothesis into those composite parts and to find independent support for the part about what her goals would be if she existed? Of course not. The evidence supports the composite *qua* composite. My only reason for believing that Madeleine Flannagan exists is the very e-mail that purports to be an attempt on her part to make contact with me (see also Houston 1994: 193f. and 228). What is true here is also true in the case of the theistic hypothesis: probability theory itself does not in any way require that we separate God’s existence from his more specific attributes, such as his goals, and confirm propositions about the latter separately.

Nor does there seem to be anything *ad hoc* about the composite hypothesis that Madeleine Flannagan exists and wishes to make contact with me. While the analysis of *ad hocness* is a vexed issue in probability theory and the philosophy of science, there is certainly nothing self-evidently *ad hoc* about the ordinary agent inference in question to the fairly specific agent hypothesis. For example, there was no more general hypothesis originally in question that was modified and made more specific so as to avoid the appearance of disconfirmation by contrary evidence.

One obvious means of gaining a conception of God that is informative involves not separately justifying auxiliaries about Divine goals but merely considering a specific theological context in which an act is attributed to a Deity with specific traits. But Sober attempts to block even the modest inferential move of testing a particular religious tradition for its explanatory power:

It is important not to be misled here by the assumption that we know what characteristics God would have if he existed. First, we should not be parochial; we should not assume that the tenets of the religion with which we are most familiar somehow define what God must be like if such a being exists.

(Sober 1999: 62)

But a person who makes use of a particular theistic hypothesis in considering comparative probabilities need not be *assuming* that he knows what God “would be like if he existed.” The likelihood comparison does not require that the hypotheses in question have high prior probabilities. Regardless of whether we *know* what God would be like if he existed, there is nothing to prevent us from gaining evidence from occurrences in the world regarding the hypothesis that *that* God—for example, the Judeo-Christian God—exists. There is nothing remotely question-begging about using a more specific religious tradition to generate the very likelihood comparison Sober claims to be seeking. Sober quickly goes on to add that, even if we do choose to use some particular theistic hypothesis, we must see whether that theistic hypothesis would enable us to make a likelihood comparison for the evidence in question—in the context of his discussion, the features of some biological entity. And he clearly does not think that even specifying the God of a particular theological tradition will be helpful.

Whatever might be the case in biology, it seems obvious that a likelihood comparison would, indeed, favor such a specific theistic hypothesis in many cases of putative historical miracles—further evidence that a theistic hypothesis can be informative without being *ad hoc*. For example, suppose that we are considering the contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18). That fire should fall on Elijah’s altar is obviously much more likely on the hypothesis that the God of Israel exists than on the hypothesis that he does not. The God of Israel, being the creator of all nature, has the power to send down fire on the altar, and even if we have no highly specific probability for his desire to show himself in this way (it is *possible* that he would decide instead to rebuke Elijah for presumption), as a *comparative* matter there seems to be no doubt of the explanatory power of the hypothesis that the God of Israel exists. There is, for example, some reason to think that he would send fire on the altar because of the Mosaic commandments against the worship of other gods. While this will not give us a specific number on the “Judaic theism” side of the likelihood comparison, a specific number is not (on Sober’s own account) strictly necessary (Sober 1999: 58). What is required is a comparison. If the God of Israel does not exist, then there is every reason to think that fire will not fall on Elijah’s altar—either because there are no gods of any kind or because, even if there are, none of them would wish to appear to confirm the existence of the monotheistic God of Israel. The likelihood comparison for “Fire falls on Elijah’s altar” heavily favors “The God of Israel exists” over “The God of Israel does not exist.”

The fire on the altar example is perhaps too easy, but the religious and factual context of a putative miracle is relevant to a comparison between the miracle hypothesis and its rival(s) in other ways as well. For example, given the Ten Commandments’ strictures on bearing false witness and adultery, we can be fairly sure that the Judeo-Christian God would not perform a miracle validating a person as a prophet if that person were a charlatan or an on-going, unrepentant adulterer. Most important of all, we know that if the God of Israel exists, he is capable of making himself known and is supposed in the past to have used miracles to validate the ministry and message of a messenger (for example, Moses).

While none of these points gives us strong reason definitely to *expect* that, for example, the God of Israel would wish to raise Jesus of Nazareth from the dead—that is, gives a specific high probability to that proposition given the existence of the God of Israel—the comparative question should pose no difficulty whatsoever. The probability of the resurrection of Jesus even if we merely hypothesize the existence (without specifying particular desires) of the God of Israel is a good deal higher than its probability if

the God Jesus claimed to represent does not exist at all. The probability of a resurrection after three days given purely naturalistic causality is nearly nil—a point correctly recognized by those who insist, incorrectly, that we can conclude that Jesus rose from the dead only if we give a high prior probability to traditional theism (McGrew and McGrew 2009: 639f.). As we have already discussed, some other putative god (such as Baal or Zeus), if he existed, would be motivated not to perform a supernatural act that would be attributed to the monotheistic God of Israel, who condemned their worship. There is also reason to doubt that some merely finite supernatural being (whatever, exactly, that concept means) would have the power to raise the dead.

What all of this shows is that it is simply false to say that we must have *independent* knowledge about God's goals before we can take historical evidence to confirm a miracle. Indeed, to require such independent evidence about Divine goals consistently would be to make the requirement impossible to satisfy. For, in any given case that might act as such independent evidence—a voice from heaven, a vision report, another miracle—the demand for independent evidence regarding the goals God would have could be made yet again. What justified information do we have independent of the event itself about whether God would wish to send that vision, affirm Jesus' ministry by a voice from heaven, and so forth? Thus, no putative act of God could ever be interpreted as an act of God unless we knew about God's goals in some purely theoretical way apart from his acts. There is no reason for us to make such a requirement, and indeed such a requirement is completely inconsistent with our interaction with personal agents in other areas of life.

As already noted, Sober says that his position is related to the great differences between God and man (Sober 2007: 10). But if there is good reason to believe the traditional Christian position that God *has* revealed himself in history—if that is the best explanation of evidence regarding certain putative miracles, for example—then there is no point in discussing *a priori* the question of whether miracles are amenable to investigation, including scientific and historical investigation.

If a Christian theist argues that the best explanation for the occurrence of some event is that it was a miracle, those who wish to deny the force of the argument need to respond to the hypothesis on its own terms. That hypothesis claims, *inter alia*, that there exists a God who is at least sufficiently like ourselves as to be capable of revealing himself to us. If the disanalogy between God and ourselves is so great that no communication from God to man is possible, then the Christian view of God is false. But it would be question-begging for a non-theist to foist upon the theologian, apologist, or (for that matter) design theorist, the hypothesis that there exists a God who is so radically unlike us that *ex hypothesi* it is impossible for us ever to interpret an occurrence as an act of that God. Since Christianity entails that a God who is able to reveal himself through mighty acts has indeed done so, that is the hypothesis the non-theist needs to counter, not a hypothesis he perhaps wishes the Christian held instead—the existence of a being so arbitrary, so radically different from us, and hence so unknowable, that we could never be justified in concluding that he had acted.

Conclusion

The God of the Bible is a God who acts perceptibly within human history—calling his people, judging them, protecting them, and revealing his nature and his laws to them through tangible acts of power. Such revelation is possible only if miracles are rationally discernible.

Any theological or atheological position that attempts to place God's action strictly outside the realms of history and science, in the sense that it can be perceived only arationally, requires an in-principle argument that the God who is not silent, who has spoken to man, cannot exist. But no such argument is forthcoming, and mere assertions that these are matters of faith or that God is too unlike ourselves for rational investigation of his acts to be possible will not suffice. Until and unless the critics of rational investigation present something better, we are free to look at evidence on a case-by-case basis and to decide whether the action of God in history is truly its best explanation.

Related Topics

Chapter 13: Evidence; Chapter 14: Naturalism; Chapter 17: Evolution; Chapter 19: Philosophical Methodology; Chapter 49: History and Experience

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SOCIOLOGY

Steve Fuller

Theism by Other Means: Sociology's Secular Problematic

The very idea of “sociology” has a deep but vexed relationship with theism. I say “the very idea” rather than “the discipline” because Auguste Comte’s original coinage of “sociology” in the 1830s referred more to a political ideology than an academic discipline. Indeed, he advocated a “positive religion,” or “positivism” (Wernick 2001). Under the circumstances, only the advent of the Third Republic in France in 1870, with its removal of church oversight for public education, made it possible for “sociology” to be incorporated into the school system; hence, the six-decade time lag between Comte’s original proposals and Emile Durkheim’s establishment of the first sociology department in 1895. In Comte’s hands, sociology was designed to mark the culmination of a certain sense of “secularization,” whereby religion does not disappear from social life but the basis of worship is shifted from a transcendent deity to “humanity.” This ideal had already taken concrete form in the great architectural legacy of the French Revolution, Le Panthéon, the mausoleum to the illustrious dead of France that still overlooks the Sorbonne in the Latin Quarter of Paris.

In its original aspiration to replace—not simply eliminate—theology, Comtean sociology was comparable to the contemporaneous post-Kantian revival of “philosophy” in Germany in the first quarter of the nineteenth century as the pedagogical site for integrating all forms of knowledge into a form of human empowerment that would render obsolete the need for supernatural authority figures (Fuller 2009: chapters 1–2). Powers previously reserved for God would now be placed squarely in the hands of the humans who are their ultimate source. In this respect, the key difference between Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, on the one hand, and Comte, on the other, as agents of “Enlightenment” is that the former promoted their post-theological epistemology from within the institutional protection of a state-backed university system, whereas Comte always remained the outsider in search of an organizational vehicle. This sociological difference might also account for the manner in which the transition from, so to speak, clerical to civic religion was to occur. Whereas the German idealists continued to speak seamlessly in terms of the “spirit” moving various forms of knowledge that are intentionally integrated in the person, Comte spoke much more openly of the replacement of spiritualist by mechanistic explanations, in particular dismissing “psychology” as pseudo-theology whose scientific aspirations would be properly realized by a sociologized version of physiology.

Comte’s original alienation from France’s Roman Catholic academic establishment enabled him and his followers to develop their intellectual differences from religious

dogma more explicitly than their German counterparts. This difference is clearly felt in Durkheim's sociology of religion, which is fixated on the function—rather than the content—of religious concepts. Thus, whereas most of Max Weber's sociology of religion is devoted to how various senses of one's relationship to God and the cosmos have determined specific social relations, Durkheim's is more concerned with the role that religious concepts have played in defining the outer limits of permissible human activity, a sociologized version of Kant's "regulative ideal of reason" (Weber 1965; Durkheim 1965). This difference in emphasis might help to explain why Durkheim appears to have been more optimistic than Weber about humanity's prospects in the face of "secularization." Durkheim fought for a welfare state based on the mutual solidarity of social classes, in which sociology would be taught as "moral education" in lieu of pastoral theology, while Weber remained throughout his life a liberal nationalist who envisaged that the gradual weakening (aka "disenchantment") of the original Christian impulse in modern society might well eventuate in charismatic rule by naked force. Where Durkheim saw in secularization the purification of society's original religious impulse, Weber saw only the dissipation and possibly perversion of that impulse.

German academia effectively simulated the Comtean assault on theism by the formal separation of the strictly epistemic from the pastoral functions of theology, the origin of what Max Weber would, a century later, canonize as "value-free" inquiry. This distinction, associated with Friedrich Schleiermacher's ascendancy to the theology chair at the renovated University of Berlin in 1810, was a largely self-protective move by theologians who wanted to preserve a distinctive "religious" sentiment necessary for the pastoral mission from its possible erosion by both political indoctrination and academic criticism (Collins 1998: chapter 12). But this move also freed theology faculties to inculcate "critico-historical" approaches to sacred texts, which served to "naturalize" them. Thus, by the 1830s several theologians claimed that their study of these texts effectively falsified most, if not all, of the sacred mysteries of Christianity that were still a source of political legitimacy. In the forefront was Ludwig Feuerbach, a former student of Hegel, whose intellectual pilgrimage from theology to the natural sciences resulted in a "humanism" rather close to Comte's religion of humanity that strongly influenced his younger contemporaries, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The final twist in this tale is Ernst Mach's application of the "critico-historical" method to his late nineteenth-century account of how a church-like physics establishment managed to suppress two centuries of empirical and conceptual objections to classical mechanics—a thesis that, in turn, inspired Einstein, Heisenberg and others to revisit those objections and thereby revolutionize the physical sciences in the early twentieth century (Fuller 2000: chapter 2).

An important question clearly runs through this general account of sociology's vexed relationship to theism: *Does the "secularization" that is widely seen as the hallmark of modern society mark a sharp break with or, rather, a continuation—if not sublimation—of Abrahamic religious ideas and sentiments?* The two implied alternatives were given canonical formulation by, respectively, Hans Blumenberg (1986) and Karl Löwith (1949). Blumenberg imagines secularization in terms of the "religious world-view" on one side of a historic divide and the "scientific world-view" on the other, whereas Löwith envisages secularization as the continuous process of purifying the human spirit from its base, a Gnostic ideal that science has expressed as the elimination of error in pursuit of the one ultimate truth. For Löwith, writing in exile in the wake of the second of two science-based world wars, secularization simply channels Abrahamic absolutist impulses by more technologically enhanced means. He takes this to be a bad thing. Blumenberg,

writing somewhat later and in a more conciliatory mode, takes a position akin to Kuhn (1970), which traces science's rapid technical advancement since the late seventeenth century to the exclusion of religious differences from the public grounds of epistemic justification. He takes this to be a good thing.

My own view is that Löwith's perspective is probably closer to the truth though it does not warrant his degree of pessimism, whereas Blumenberg's is more politically correct but perhaps captive to wishful thinking, given the further secularization that science itself has undergone since the end of the Cold War, whereby both commercial and religious forces—sometimes in tandem—have placed increasing pressure on the scientific establishment to stop enforcing general explanatory concepts that undermine or preclude the self-understanding of significant segments of the population. Unsurprisingly, given their direct bearing on our mental and physical well-being, the biomedical sciences have been the main sites of contestation. I especially have in mind devotees of complementary medicine and intelligent design theory (aka scientific creationism), who have considerable academic skills (though perhaps not in the core disciplines of the orthodoxies they are challenging) as well as political, cultural and economic clout. The situation here bears comparison with Europe from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, during which time the Reformation evolved into the Enlightenment: namely, in each situation there is an emergent educated middle class with dissenting religious views but a clear financial stake in the handling of civil affairs that appeared to be unduly influenced by state protected clerical interests (Wuthnow 1989: Parts I–II). However, nowadays the “protected clerical interests” are those of the scientific establishment, which has led to the rise of what I have called “Protscience,” or “Protestant Science” (Fuller 2010).

The strongest *prima facie* arguments for seeing secularization as constituting a sharp break with theism are institutional, not intellectual. They are related to sociology's own defining problematic. All of the works that now constitute the canon of classical sociology (for example, works by Marx, Durkheim, Weber) were preoccupied with the demarcation of something called “modern society” from prior “traditional” forms of social life. The omnibus use of the word “religion” to cover what had held together complex forms of social organization prior to the rise of the modern nation-state also dates from this period, the third quarter of the nineteenth century (Masuzawa 2005). At that time the phrase “world religions” is first invoked to include not only the Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—but also Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, despite their rather disparate views on the nature and even existence of a personal deity. Against this backdrop, what makes us “modern” is the removal of “religion” in this new omnibus sense as publicly acceptable grounds for political and epistemic legitimacy. In this respect, “religion” was invented as a residual category to give a face to the “other” of modernity.

A full appreciation of the precedent for this mentality requires observing two phenomena that occurred in parallel over the previous (that is, the eighteenth) century but are not normally associated together: on the one hand, the legal constitution of new republics in both the Old and New Worlds, most notably (and durably) that of the United States of America, which functioned *de facto* as sacred texts for a civic religion; on the other hand, the construction of colonial territories, most notably British “India,” whose integration of peoples of traditionally conflicting faiths was designed to demonstrate values of fairness and efficiency that transcend entrenched religious differences and serve as a template for eventual collective self-rule. Science grew into a comparable

role of secularizer as it enabled people of diverse ideological origins to unify for common purpose without first having to resolve their doctrinal differences. The English Lord Chancellor Francis Bacon had first projected such a role for science in the early seventeenth century, partly in a failed effort to prevent a religiously based civil war. Shortly after the war's end, in 1660, the Charter of the Royal Society of London institutionalized a version of Bacon's vision (Lynch 2001).

Over the next 350 years, science came to be more explicitly identified with secularization as it sided with the state against religious authorities in matters of education and public policy. This stance was rhetorically clearest in countries with strong religious ties to the Roman Catholic Church, perennially a potential source of divided political loyalty, given its attempt to command universal allegiance from a particular location. In this respect, Comtean positivism served as a basis for secular nationalism not only in France but also throughout Latin America, where the Pope was equally seen as a menacing foreign force (Zea 1963). Indeed, the Comtean motto "Order and Progress" remains inscribed in the Brazilian flag. Recalling this history helps one to appreciate the irony of the topsy-turvy politics that beset Latin America in the 1960s, when a left-leaning "liberation theology" originating from within Catholicism joined forces with a global Marxist revolutionary movement in trying to upend locally entrenched elites, typically beholden to the United States. Here the forces of universalism, regardless of church allegiance, were arrayed against particularist forms of secularism that had failed to deliver political autonomy for their people (Gutierrez 1988).

Although the Latin American case is extreme, it nevertheless points to the partly illusory character of "secularization," at least as understood sociologically. As a matter of fact, "secularization" has been strongest in the nations of northern Europe, where the (Protestant) Christian church continues to enjoy state privilege, albeit at the cost of considerable state oversight and clerical self-constraint. Where there is no such clearly institutionalized relationship (some might say "co-optation"), the churches lie in wait for when the secular state fails to command spontaneous moral legitimacy. Thus, evangelism flourishes in times of low voter turnout, when a call to return to "fundamentals" can mobilize the disaffected to support perspectives missing from the political landscape (Micklethwait and Wooldridge 2009). However, it is to the credit of secularization as an "institutional" force that these conflicts are waged, for the most part, by means established by secular authorities, namely, elections and judicial decisions. Whatever violence has been caused by "religious" elements has usually been focused on the alleged failure of secular authorities to abide by their own rules.

Secularizing the Sacred Mind I: From Theology to Physics

Of course, it would be a mistake to see secularization in exclusively institutional terms. Its intellectual dimension has been most cogently and exhaustively prosecuted in Blumenberg (1986), which traces science's divestiture of theology to the removal of God as a necessary motive force in the physical universe in the seventeenth century. The focal concept here is *inertia*, which Newton defined as intrinsic to bodies for purposes of mathematical calculation. This enabled him to determine the state and motion of physical objects without reference to some higher-order entity that guided their passage (unlike the rival concept, *conatus*). To be sure, Newton did not make a clean break with theism, since his mathematics required periodic divine intervention to inject new energy into the universe. This is the source of the "god of the gaps" epithet that continues to dog those

who would see the cosmos as the product of intentional agency, or “intelligent design.” Nevertheless, Newton’s very light touch deity was a striking advance over his rival Descartes, whose physics required that God recreate the universe on a moment-to-moment basis. Moreover, Newton’s less mathematically exact contemporaries helped the secular revolution along. In particular, Leibniz held that God could have only created the best of all possible worlds, which implies that any difficulties in calculation simply reflect our own failure to have fathomed God’s equations—not, as Newton had thought, God’s periodic need to compensate for an original inadequacy (Funkenstein 1986: chapters 2–3).

It was a tricky choice theologically: On the one hand, Newton presented the known universe in calculable form, but at the cost of God having periodically to reset its parameters. On the other, Leibniz refused to believe that Newton had the final word, even though Leibniz himself lacked a comparably articulated alternative account of the cosmos. The history of physics over the past 300-plus years is best understood as recognizing Newton’s achievement but treating it from a Leibnizian point of view. Thus, even atheist physicists (see, for example, Hawking 1988) continue to profess their desire to enter “the mind of God,” which assumes the existence of what Leibniz called “sufficient reason” for the idiosyncrasies that mark our universe. For his part, Newton thought that he had already done the deed, given his Unitarian view of the deity as an indefinitely greater version of our individual selves. But that meant that God’s hand could not be completely hidden. Even the deity’s best-laid plans face a recalcitrant, if not ill-disposed, material medium in need of continual monitoring and periodic adjustment. Here Newton appeared to be closer to Descartes than Leibniz in proposing an irreducible dualism of mind and matter, whereby the deity demonstrates its transcendence of material reality by periodically intervening in its operations.

For his part, Leibniz argued that matter is literally mind without sensory transparency, and hence—as Hegel would later put it—exists “in itself.” This view proved influential in the nineteenth century as the basis for using physical probes to explore mental reality, the basis of experimental psychology (Heidelberger 2004). An intuitive way to think about this line of thought is that non-human matter is like a brain-functioning human who lacks the capacity to express her thoughts, which means that others need to intervene to release her cognitive potential. In that case, we differ from rocks simply in terms of our much greater capacity—and hence responsibility—to release that divinely implanted potential in ourselves and in those creatures that cannot do so for themselves. This is a classic Christian argument in support of the arts and industry that goes back to medieval monasticism, which in the modern period was captured by *vis viva*, or “living force,” the prototype of the concept of energy (Noble 1997).

Leibniz’s perspective truly came into its own in the early twentieth century with Einstein’s confirmation of matter’s atomic structure and its convertibility to energy. This was less about the existence of material atoms *per se* (which Leibniz had formally opposed) than their character when taken collectively: Supposedly “dumb” and “inert” matter was revealed to contain a hidden logic, knowledge of which would allow us to unleash entirely new forms of being, most notably nuclear power. By the mid-twentieth century, something similar happened to the nature of life itself, especially in the wake of Erwin Schrödinger’s 1943 Dublin lectures “What Is Life?” in which he famously cast the molecular constitution of the gene as a code, whose cracking would unleash godlike creative powers as we learn to recombine life’s elements in novel ways (Schrödinger 1955; Fuller 2008: chapter 6). Nowadays Schrödinger is regarded as a John the Baptist figure in the DNA Revolution that marks the turn away from Darwin’s own rather

bleak Malthusian outlook on life's prospects (more about which in the next section) towards the more optimistic visions projected by both biotechnology and intelligent design theory, the version of scientific creationism that treats genetic information as just as much an expression of divine *logos* as the Bible (Meyer 2009).

Secularizing the Sacred Mind II: From Theodicy to Political Economy

But even at their best humans are only gods in the making. Thus, the sort of self-conscious knowledge that Leibniz and his intellectual offspring allowed is prone to both epistemic and moral error in ways that can lead to second thoughts about whether our godlike capacities are worth cultivating in the first place. (Think nuclear weapons and eugenics.) Leibniz tried to make sense of such “dirty hands” as the cost of spiritual progress by inventing a discipline, *theodicy*, dedicated to understanding nature's *prima facie* radical imperfections, ranging from natural catastrophes and evil acts to casual suffering, not as signs of divine weakness but hidden strengths that can be fathomed in the fullness of time. Two of the most influential sociologists of religion in the twentieth century, Max Weber (1965) and Peter Berger (1967), identified theodicy as fundamental to religion's continuing legitimacy, since it promises answers to questions of cosmic justice. However, Weber and Berger defined the force of that legitimacy in opposing terms, each of which has clear secular descendants.

Weber, focusing mainly on medieval monasticism and early modern Puritanism, stressed suffering as an experience less to be tolerated or avoided than to be learned from, so as to continually improve the human condition, if not to recover fully our divine entitlement. From this came the modern scientific world-view that we progress by active learning through trial and error—by experimenting not only on our theories but also our environment and even our own bodies. This has opened the way to religious treatments of contemporary “transhumanism,” with its exploration of extending our bodies beyond their natural biological limits and even the transfer of mentality from carbon- to silicon-based vehicles (Amarasingam 2008). It is probably no accident that leaders of three successive generations of the most ambitious project to extend distinctly human traits beyond our carbon-based heritage—the artificial intelligence gurus Norbert Wiener, Herbert Simon and Ray Kurzweil—have been drawn from Unitarianism, the species of Christian dissent that associates the human condition with the imperfect recognition of our intrinsic divinity (Davis 1998; Fuller 2011: Introduction).

But, as Weber fully realized, theodicy's didactic character is not limited to suffering but applies equally to occurrent experiences of well-being. In other words, the rewards reaped by a virtuous life should not be seen as exclusively, or even primarily, the product of one's own efforts. They too are indicative of the disproportionate means by which divine ends are realized in the long term. We might experience the outworking of the divine plan as either misfortune or good fortune, but the aspect of “fortune”—that is, its contingent relationship of our fates to our own plans—needs to be kept firmly in mind to instill the requisite sense of humility and focus. The variation in individual fortunes can be explained as the over- and undershooting of the divine plan vis-à-vis recalcitrant matter, not least our own bodies. Not surprisingly the concept of statistical norm as fluctuation around a central tendency originated as a Newton-inspired attempt to capture divine agency in mathematical terms (Hacking 1975).

But whether the apparent erratic relationship between events and desert was attributed to a deity blind to detail or to humans blind to the deity's plan, a recipient of good

fortune was incentivized to try still harder. It was this mentality, which came into its own with the rise of Calvinism, that enabled the “Protestant Ethic” to evolve into the “Spirit of Capitalism,” as successful businesspeople came to value re-investment over personal consumption as the appropriate attitude to profit in a world where one’s current state is at best an indirect indicator of future success (Weber 1958). Here Marx provides the missing link to transhumanism, as the technological principle of efficiency—that is, maximum production from minimum consumption—becomes a materialist version of what Weber (1965) suggestively called “asceticism,” recalling the Greek term for an athletic form of self-discipline. Here humanly embodied labor itself comes to be seen as so disposable that we should welcome any opportunity to offload centuries of drudgery to machines and transfer our self-identities to whatever tasks on which our bodies can outperform machines.

In contrast, Berger, whose more generic treatment of religion gives greater weight to Buddhism and other Eastern theodicies, argues that simply to recognize the compatibility of God’s best efforts and recurrent suffering provides both consolation and exoneration whenever our own hopes are dashed and our best-laid plans go awry. The Western version of this attitude is most pronounced in the classical “pagan” philosophies of Epicureanism and Skepticism, the modern descendant of which is the *laissez-faire* attitude associated with the Reverend Thomas Malthus’ population pressure model of human survival, which Darwin subsequently generalized across all species under the rubric of “natural selection.” Malthus argued that statistically regular mortality rates, according to which the poor die more often and more quickly than the rich, belong to some inscrutable divine optimization strategy—not a humanly manageable problem for which poor laws, and later the welfare state, might provide a solution (Fuller 2006: chapter 13). In effect, God works not *with* us but only *through* us: our lives are literally the deity’s experiments, an understanding of which (so Malthus believed) would allow us to abandon the delusions of grandeur that often pass for a sense of moral obligation toward the poor. Here we should not underestimate the dampening effect that the appearance of statistical data on the relentlessness of, say, infant mortality had on Enlightenment-style optimism. Perhaps the most notable long-term defensive response to such Malthusian pessimism has been the adoption of the same statistical methods to track the efficacy of medical treatments (Wootton 2006: chapter 8).

The *Universitas* as Theodicy’s Secular Vehicle

A striking feature of Weber’s and Berger’s takes on theodicy is that they both point to the emergence of the secular science of political economy in the late eighteenth century. This “overdetermination” of theodicy’s historical trajectory can be understood by considering the legal foundations of the medieval university as one of the original “corporations” (*universitates*)—indeed, that the first university, Bologna, was dominated by a law faculty dedicated to translating Christian theological conceptions of our relationship with God into the precursors of modern economic concepts, especially those taken to be indicative of the capitalist system. Prior to the innovation of the “corporation” as a legal category, an individual’s legal status was determined in one of two ways: by birth (*gens*), which was the default position, or by temporary association (*socius*), the exceptional position. Corresponding to this distinction was, on the one hand, ordinary economic activity—the maintenance of the family household—and, on the other, the occasional buying and selling of goods in the market to make up for what one cannot

produce in one's own home. Lacking was the third category of a perpetually self-sustaining market for goods regardless of their capacity to satisfy household needs: in other words, the production and distribution of goods for their own sake, the essence of capitalism—but also, of course, the pursuit of science (Fuller 2006: chapter 4).

An important linguistic innovation of the twelfth century associated with the great Bolognese glossator Azzone Soldanus was the reification of “what is between”—*quod inter est* in Latin (aka *interest*)—to refer literally to the additional value accrued by money in the time spent between the provision of a loan and its repayment. Before the coinage of “interest,” the idea that one should charge for lending money was seen as taking advantage of another person's misery. However, Soldanus turned the old concept on its head, focusing on the opportunity that the loan provides the poor person to improve himself. After all, if the borrower can repay the loan with interest in the allotted time, then he will probably have generated a profit in the interim, which by having raised his standard of living, would demonstrate his worthiness to have received the loan. In short, interest turns the loan into a moral test of the borrower that is made possible through temporary self-restraint on the part of the lender. As Weber observed, this moralistic slant on the loan, which ideally eventuates in the improvement of both parties, came to be especially emphasized in Calvinist theology, in which the charging of interest functioned as a vehicle of moral instruction. A secular descendant of this strategy of binding two parties together so they mutually benefit by cancelling out each other's excesses was used in the eighteenth century to justify the virtue of markets, which were envisaged as forcing producers to be more practical and consumers more discriminating than each might be otherwise (Rothschild 2001).

Two points stand out in this history. First, the general idea that more can be made of less—or even that virtue can be made of vice—reflects our ontological distance from God. God does not require any incentives, nudges or psychological tricks to do what is right: the deity does it spontaneously and without solicitation, let alone at the “right price”; hence, the stark contrast drawn by Calvinists between the Grace by which God saves people without requiring anything in return and the Roman Catholic doctrine of salvation by good works, which was held in contempt for insinuating that the deity would engage in exchange relations, as if God needs or desires something that only we can provide. Second, the implicit valorization of poverty, Weber's “asceticism,” pertains to the path we need to undertake to become more “godlike,” which again is understood as something radically different from simply trying to please or appease God. One cannot stress too much that the progressive strain in the history of Abrahamic theism takes seriously *both* the blasphemy of our supposing that God wants something that we are uniquely capable of providing and the virtue of aspiring to adopt God's standpoint as our own.

An important benchmark here is the incorporation of the “mendicant” (or begging) Christian orders, the Dominicans and Franciscans, into the Roman Catholic fold in the thirteenth century, mainly to staff the early universities. These orders had arisen to protest the Church of Rome's increasing preoccupation with secular affairs, especially property ownership. By personal example, they demonstrated how one could survive by a sophisticated form of begging that involved earning the respect of multiple benefactors by showing that they could always yield a profit from whatever they were given. At the same time, this “diversity of income streams,” as we would now put it, provided a material basis for autonomy that was lacking in the patronage-based political economy of spirituality that characterized most of Christendom and Islam. As a result, these

friars persuasively presented themselves as no mere stewards but outright creators of value—and thus not members of a servile species but exemplars of God’s offspring. The mendicants’ devaluation of steady-state ownership in favor of self-transcending productivity would re-emerge in secular garb as the liberal ideological front of the Industrial Revolution (Polanyi 1944).

The mendicants stressed the value added by a “spiritual” life in the material world. It was in this context that “vows of poverty” acquired world-historic significance. “Poverty” (*povertas*) clearly did not have today’s negative connotations (Langholm 1998). Indeed, it was most naturally understood as humanity’s attempt to approximate divine creation *ex nihilo* by “doing the most with the least.” In that sense, poverty was the prototype for the modern concept for *efficiency*. Mendicant poverty can be contrasted with, on the one hand, the *miserable* who are inefficient because their labor is underemployed, and on the other, the *miserly* who are inefficient because they hoard their wealth rather than invest it productively. The progress of modern capitalism has heightened the experience of this contrast. On the one hand, the surplus of workers in an increasingly automated workplace drives wages down, resulting in the poor having to struggle more to make ends meet; on the other hand, the rich are caught in an endlessly ephemeral consumer culture, as they need to acquire more goods to maintain the same level of satisfaction. In both cases, diminishing returns on investment is the ultimate secular sin.

The dominant *universitas* of the modern era—the state (first as city-state and then nation-state)—has tried to resolve these countervailing excesses of the human condition through welfare policies, in which redistributive taxation has increasingly figured. It is often overlooked that this development has always had strong cross-ideological (Christian Democrat and Social Democrat) and cross-denominational (Catholic and Protestant) Christian backing on both sides of the Atlantic (Daly 2006). But arguably, from their inception, universities have been in the business of redistributing specifically *epistemic* advantage—in the medieval context, by commenting on canonical sacred and pagan texts, so as to make it easier for students to acquire the scholar’s knowledge. On the one hand, this process ensured that scholars did not succumb to the version of sloth that Thomas Aquinas called *acedia*, a souring of the soul that resulted from knowing too much to act decisively. On the other hand, slowly but surely, knowledge that might have otherwise remained esoteric and authoritarian became part of an ideational commons, on which various disenfranchised groups down through the centuries have drawn to free themselves from conditions that inhibited the fulfillment of their divine potential.

Making Theism Safe for the Secular World: Or, Who’s Afraid of Natural Theology?

In an era when “ecumenical” approaches to religion function as proxies for global diplomacy, calls for the revival of *natural theology* would seem to throw caution to the wind. Natural theology purports to provide the scientific basis for theodicy by comprehending nature in functional terms, the product of “intelligent design” (Fuller 2007: chapter 1). It is a specifically Abrahamic discipline that takes literally the Genesis idea that humans are created “in the image and likeness of God,” what after St Augustine has been called the *imago dei* doctrine, according to which humanity differs from God by degree not kind—that is, we are not merely a divine output but, in some sense, an outright representation of the Creator, whose creative powers are of the same sort (but to a much greater extent) as our own (Fuller 2008: chapter 2). This in turn requires a belief in

the literal overlap of the human and the divine mind—specifically, that by advancing the frontiers of human knowledge, we might become more like God (Fuller 2010). The great Cartesian theologian Nicolas Malebranche wrote of this as our “vision in God,” which enables us—when we can—to think God’s thoughts. Our anticipatory powers exceed those of the animals by going beyond mere generalization from personal experience to forms of understanding that are clearly imagined but have yet to be encountered in experience. It is this trans-, or at least counter-, inductive capacity, however fallible, that marks our divinity.

Here is a more explicit argument for the project of natural theology, which draws attention to its inevitably controversial character:

1. As creatures in *imago dei*, we are empowered to understand the nature of reality.
2. That God creates through an outworking of *logos* vouchsafes this point. Thus, we should expect that reality’s structure is ultimately rational, even language-like.
3. Hence in some sense we learn about the *modus operandi* of the divine plan by monitoring the workings of our own minds in both theoretical and practical settings.
4. In terms of modern secular sciences, psychology and technology provide clues to physics and biology, respectively, understood as products of God’s handiwork. (This helps to explain the ease of metaphorical traffic between the natural and human sciences starting in the eighteenth century.)
5. However, since our grasp of *logos* is necessarily finite and fallible, we should also expect that our understanding will always need to be improved; hence science is primarily concerned with the proposal and testing of hypotheses, in search of an intelligible response.
6. That the experimental method allows us regularly to generate such responses is a secular variant on Divine Grace. After all, in principle God could simply choose not to communicate at all through our experiments.
7. But a consequence of our divine gift of free will is that we must decide how to interpret the result. Even if nature corroborates our hypotheses, the question remains of how to go forward: Do we simply persist in our prior beliefs, refine or radically alter them—and if so, how? The problem of theory choice in science is thus ultimately an existential one, a point that the young Karl Popper grasped from his reading of the German translations of Kierkegaard published in the 1920s.

(Fuller 2003: chapter 10)

In practice, such a cognitively oriented approach to religion did much to promote science and modern rationalism. In its heyday, from the late seventeenth to the late nineteenth century, the nowadays emotively charged binary “supernatural/natural” was seen as a fluid boundary under continual negotiation as scientists succeeded in resolving divine agency into reliable mathematical equations associated with gravitation and electromagnetism (Knight 2004). In this respect, supernaturalism’s proof lay in its eventual assimilation to the naturalistic world-view, such that even people without faith come to accept the workings of extraordinary forces that cannot be validated through unassisted sensory experience. In this respect, science functions as an unfolding *Summa contra*

Gentiles for the modern world, to recall Thomas Aquinas' great Christian playbook against pagans and doubters. Thus, a newly resurrected James Clerk Maxwell—someone who quite explicitly evangelized his science—would find today's dogmatic claims for science's "methodological naturalism" a systematic mistaking of the effect for its cause. While in principle everyone can now grasp and benefit from electromagnetism, the very countenancing of its existence had required a belief in the supernatural (Fuller 2008).

Nevertheless, no one can deny that the animus behind natural theology has been also responsible for the heresies, schisms and other conflicts that have especially plagued the history of Christianity. The presupposed divisive idea is that we must agree on God's nature before we can agree on how best to conduct our own lives, since our nature is sufficiently close to God's to be capable of reaching such an agreement. Indeed, our capacity in this regard provides a test of our recovery from Adam's fall (Harrison 2007). In practice, this has meant that controversies over the nature of God have stood proxy for arguments about the normative grounds of the human condition. These controversies at once crowd the space left open by modern science's studied refusal to pass value judgments of personal or societal relevance (Proctor 1991). Yet, they also expose a crucial ambiguity: Do the laws of nature allow for choice because they do not bear on the specificity of our lives (that is, they do not constrain at the level that most matters to us) or simply because it is within our power to negate their hold on us normatively? The former prospect suggests that God has divided the labor of Creation with us, while the latter prospect suggests that God is testing our worthiness as beings capable of transcending nature's default settings. Again we seem to be led back to natural theology.

Indeed, the surveys and in-depth interviews recently reported in Ecklund (2010) suggest that while scientists tend to oppose, albeit often without properly understanding, conventional religious belief systems for their allegedly latent anti-scientific motives, they themselves, when pressed on the normative implications of their own views, come perilously close to "New Age" religions in envisaging an impending science-induced paradigm shift in our way of being that will sweep away many secular and sacred orthodoxies. In this respect, scientists are remarkably rather unlike the "separate but equal" dualists with regard to science and religion that Steven Jay Gould (1999) imagined. Indeed, professional scientists differ from the Protoscientists mentioned earlier in this chapter only in their opposition to the *de facto* libertarianism of Protoscientists, who exercise discretion on the bits of science they wish to stake their lives on.

Faced with the inevitable frustrations of justifying religious sentiment in terms of natural theology, a broad inter-faith coalition has called for the renunciation of Abrahamic literalism. Instead it has argued that religion should not be in the business of second-guessing God but provide meaning in a world ultimately governed by forces beyond one's control. Karen Armstrong (2009), perhaps the most publicly visible champion of this approach, associates it with a reversion from *logos* to *mythos* in religious thinking, that is, from what sets apart Judaism, Christianity and Islam from other religions to what they share with them. The strategy aims to strike the right existential balance between hubris and despair, where natural theology is taken to have erred towards the former. Historical evidence for the efficacy of this strategy can be seen in that "Christendom" as a unified secular and religious Christian empire has come closer to realization during periods when the *imago dei* doctrine was interpreted—as Thomas Aquinas did interpret it—as specifying an *analogy* rather than an *identity*. This move circumvented vexed discussions about, say, whether we should aspire to "superhuman"—what are now called "transhuman"—modes of being that might bring us closer to the divine. Perhaps the

most influential secular version of this analogical approach flows through the hermeneutical tradition in the human sciences, which, beginning with Giambattista Vico in the eighteenth century, has argued that we can “understand” (that is, in terms of original intention) only that which we could have created. The natural world is excluded from such intimate knowledge because only God could have created it. It follows that nature can only be “explained,” in the sense that its law-like regularity can be grasped without comprehending the intentions of the cosmic lawgiver (Fuller 2010: chapter 2).

Sociological interest in theism has been focused on the institutionalization of, on the one hand, ideas and theories about God and, on the other, God-oriented practices. Weber and Durkheim can be seen as standing for those two positions, respectively. Interestingly, neither position takes “atheism,” in the strict sense, as a serious proposition. God never fully disappears from the scene, as secularization appears as an extended exercise of pouring old wines into new bottles. This point is sometimes difficult to see because the disciplines involved in providing a modern translation of theistic concepts—most notably theodicy and natural theology—have fallen into disrepute, accused of ineptly trying to co-opt new ideas for purposes of apologetics. When, say, Karl Marx identified theology with “ideology” and Vilfredo Pareto with “derivatives” of a residual religious instinct, this is what they had in mind. Indeed, even theologians routinely ignore, if not condemn, theodicy and natural theology for their heterodoxy while failing to credit them for fleshing out divine agency in terms of entities and forces that enabled the scientific imagination to transcend the realm of commonsense. Nevertheless, if we take the Internet in the twenty-first century to be comparable to the printing press in the sixteenth century, science appears to be in the process of repeating the institutional history of Christianity (Fuller 2010: chapter 4). At the end there might still be a science establishment comparable to the Roman Catholic Church but it will be forced to live in an intellectual ecology populated by Protoscience denominations that interpret the same scientific research in radically different ways, both in terms of ultimate explanations and practical implications. Kuhn’s (1970) long influential idea that a science is defined by the presence of one dominant “paradigm” will thus go the way of the idea of a unified Christendom. It is something that today’s liberal ecumenists have yet to come to grips with.

Related Topics

Chapter 14: Naturalism; Chapter 15: Humanities; Chapter 23: Psychology; Chapter 31: Civil Society; Chapter 37: Globalization; Chapter 48: Community

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Recommended Reading

- Berger, P. (1967) *The Sacred Canopy*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday. The classic statement of religion's continuing role in rationalizing human suffering even in our putatively secular world.
- Blumenberg, H. (1986 [1968]) *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. An exhaustive philosophical history of modernity as traced through the removal of God from the day-to-day operation of the cosmos.

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- Durkheim, E. (1965 [1912]) *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, New York: Free Press. The most explicit examination and defense of the idea that religion is no more and no less than society's self-understanding.
- Fuller, S. (2010) *Science: The Art of Living*, Durham and Montreal: Acumen and McGill-Queens University Press. Argues that more than simple theism, modern science has sublimated such fundamental Abrahamic conceptions as theodicy, Providence and Grace.
- Löwith, K. (1948) *Meaning in History*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. A set of essays ranging from Augustine to Spengler that chart the 1,500-year sublimation of Christian salvation history into modern science-led accounts of progress.
- Noble, D. (1997) *The Religion of Technology: The Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention*, New York: Alfred Knopf. A very critical but engaging account of the history of technology since the Middle Ages as an expression of humanity's Abrahamic privilege.
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PSYCHOLOGY

Beverley Clack

Contemporary philosophical discussions of theism tend to focus upon issues of its veracity or its meaningfulness as an explanatory hypothesis. For philosophers of religion in the analytic tradition, an important concern has been to establish a convincing correspondence between the theistic description of God and external reality (notably Swinburne 1979; Mawson 2005). An alternative thread in the history of the subject can be discerned, however, where the investigation of theism does more than offer a critical analysis of the way in which an externally existent God might be defined. Indeed, this philosophical enterprise can be read rather differently, for it can be argued that accounts of God reveal much about the human beings who offer these descriptions, providing ways of understanding the concerns that shape the structures of the human mind. Approached in this manner, the concept of God becomes less something whose importance is determined by the success with which it mirrors external reality and more a concept whose significance is derived from its ability to illuminate the peculiarities and possibilities inherent in being human.

This chapter tracks the development of the psychological approach to theism. Identifying theism with the processes of the human mind is not without its dangers if one wishes to develop a sympathetic account of the role religion plays in shaping human understanding of self, others and the world. The psychological approach has readily lent itself to reductionist accounts of the nature of religion, and recent work in evolutionary psychology tends to suggest that this is the only way of understanding the relationship between the idea of God and the development of the human mind (see, for example, Atran 2005; Dennett 2006). While the survey that follows provides some justification for reading the psychology of theism in this way, a reductive approach is not the only one open to those interested in the relationship between God and the mind. On the contrary, recognizing the idea of God to be grounded in the structures of the human psyche might enable a richer discussion of the role God—and religion—plays in reflections that might be made on the vicissitudes of being human.

Intimations of Psychology: Descartes and God

Seeking a clear genealogy for any particular approach to religion or the concept of God can seem a rather artificial enterprise. What exactly constitutes a “psychological” approach to this concept? But tracking the gradual development of this approach provides a rich context for considering the breadth possible for an approach which takes seriously the psychological dimension.

We might, for example, start with Anselm (1033–1119). Anselm describes God as a “Perfect Being” whose existence can be established purely through the exercise of reason. Nothing is needed in order to establish this God’s existence—no external evidence, no empirical facts—except a suitably thoughtful engagement with the concept itself. And the location of his argument is particularly significant, for Anselm’s discussion of the reality of God takes place in his prayerful meditations. Thus his practice prioritizes the role of the individual, who, through thoughtful meditation, is capable of realizing the reality of God.

To emphasize the role of psychology, however, places the individual at the heart of things in a way that would have been unthinkable to Anselm and his contemporaries. Anselm’s priority was cultivating his relationship with God, not with investigating the workings of the human mind. A more appropriate harbinger of the human-centered approach could be Descartes (1596–1650), in whose thought the full weight of modernity begins to be felt. As the Western idea of the individual develops apace post-Renaissance, so Descartes locates his account of God in the investigation of the human mind. The opening paragraphs of the *Third Meditation* suggest that the reality of God can be established by entering the internal world and rigorously interrogating the ideas that lie therein. This process of critical enquiry, significantly, does not just result in attaining knowledge of God. Descartes connects his method explicitly to the attainment of better self-knowledge: “Communing only with myself, and examining my inner self, I shall try to make myself, little by little, better known and more familiar to myself” (Descartes 1968 [1641]: 113). The inner world of the individual becomes the starting point not only for the investigation of God but also for a better understanding of the self. The psyche provides the bedrock for theism; but this theism is intimately connected to the quest for human self-knowledge.

Descartes’ conclusions, considered in more detail, provide a model that is rather different from that of later thinkers whose ideas also emphasize the relationship between the concept of God and the inner lives of men and women. As Descartes attempts to secure the idea of God that is so crucial to his quest for epistemic certainty, he asks the question that dominates the psychological engagement with theism: *who* is the cause of the idea of God? Is it something separate from the self, or is it an idea derived from human experience and reflection?

Descartes’ answer depends upon defining God as “an infinite substance, eternal, immutable, independent, omniscient, omnipotent, and by which I and all the other things which exist . . . have been created and produced” (Descartes 1968 [1641]: 124). Given that these qualities are “so great and eminent” (Descartes 1968 [1641]: 124), how could I, a finite human being, have ever come up with them? Descartes rejects outright the idea that such infinite qualities could have been arrived at as the converse of the experience of being mutable, fallible and mortal. How could that which is fundamentally imperfect ever arrive at this vision of perfection? The only credible explanation for such an idea is that it has been placed in the self by God (Descartes 1968 [1641]: 130). Importantly, this reflection is used to establish the cornerstone of Cartesian epistemic certainty: once God’s reality is established, God can act as guarantor for other claims that might be made about the nature of the universe.

The effect of Descartes’ philosophizing is to place the role of God—if not God himself—in the internal world of the individual. The religious adequacy of this approach was, famously, challenged by Pascal: “I cannot forgive Descartes. In all his philosophy he would have been quite willing to dispense with God. But he had to make him give

a fillip to set the world in motion; beyond this, he has no further need of God” (Pascal 1966 [1670]: §77). Something is lacking, Pascal suggests, in the way God is used in Descartes’ system. Descartes has failed to understand that God is grounded in something altogether more basic than the need for philosophical certainty; namely, in the need for what Pascal calls “love and consolation.” Here is the fundamental divide between different claims that might be made about God. Is God a concept whose meaning is derived from its place in a philosophical system, or is God’s meaning located in the experiences of human beings as they struggle with the realities of suffering and the need for connection?

Critical Voices: Nineteenth-Century Approaches

What might be understood as the psychology of theism proper arises out of the skepticism of the nineteenth century. With the Enlightenment and the increasing significance of the “turn to the subject” (Pattison 2001: 44–62; King 1995: 1–38) as the primary focus for intellectual enquiry, the desire to relate the idea of God to the investigation of the human comes to shape the philosophies of a number of interconnected figures.

The most important philosopher for the development of this approach is Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72). Influenced by Hegel’s (1770–1831) philosophy of spirit, Feuerbach identified its political implications. New weight is given to the human sphere if “*Geist*” is working itself out in it. Increasingly Feuerbach became disaffected with the religious expression of Hegel’s thought, seeking instead to expose religion as “a dream of the human mind” that must be overcome (Feuerbach 1957 [1841]: xxxix). Reflecting Kant’s view that there can be no empirical evidence for the existence of God, Feuerbach goes further: the concept of God is grounded in human life, its attitudes and values. In *The Essence of Christianity* he maps the process through which the concept of God evolves, and his central claim is stark: God is a projection of human values. The process effectively identified by Descartes is reversed: it is not that God has created human beings; rather the dreams of the human mind have created the idea of God.

There is something rather more subtle about Feuerbach’s claim than might initially seem to be the case. In exposing the similarity between divine attributes and human ideals, Feuerbach links the former explicitly to the emergence of human self-consciousness. Indeed, religious constructions play a crucial role in the development of this peculiarly human perspective because they are identical with human self-consciousness. This point can be read solely as a piece of criticism, but there is more to it than that. Without the idea of God, humans would not have become self-conscious. In order to be self-conscious, to attain self-awareness, an external object is required (Feuerbach 1957 [1841]: 13–14). Through contemplating this object, the sense of self emerges. We become acquainted with who we are, and are able to create the values that we come to hold dear. Indeed, the crucial difference between humans and other animals is that humans can *transcend* their animal existences through this process of reflection (Feuerbach 1957 [1841]: 5). Distinguishing ourselves from other objects in the physical world through this process of externalization makes subjectivity possible. Far from being subsumed in the physical world we are able to reflect upon it, to see ourselves as somehow different from it.

Yet there is a tension inherent in this achievement. Subjectivity involves detaching the nascent self from the physical environment, and while this process establishes the mental capacities of the human animal, with it comes an awareness of human fallibility

and limitation. At this point the concept of God provides a response to the sense of anxiety that accompanies this shift. If humans are fallible, weak and mortal, there is a being who is not, a being who embodies to the fullest extent the values humans seek. So in the Christian tradition we find a God who embodies reason to its fullest extent and is thus described as “*Pure Mind*”; a God who embodies all power and who is thus *omnipotent*; a God who embodies all goodness and who is thus *all-good*. God is the mirror image of human beings, immune from all-too-human failings and limitations:

The divine being is nothing else than the human being, or rather the human nature purified, freed from the limits of the individual man, made objective—i.e., contemplated and revered as another, a distinct being. All the attributes of the divine nature are, therefore, attributes of the human nature.

(Feuerbach 1957 [1841]: 14)

Reason, power and love are not divine *because* God has them; rather “God has [such qualities] because [they are] in [themselves] divine: . . . without [such qualities] God would be a defective being” (Feuerbach 1957 [1841]: 21). Divinity is no more and no less than the reification of human values.

If the idea of God in part arises from human weakness, the worship of this supreme projection is accompanied by the debasement of human potentiality: “To enrich God, man must become poor; that God may be all, man must be nothing” (Feuerbach 1957 [1841]: 26). All that is best about human life and experience is located elsewhere to devastating effect: “To know God and not oneself to be God, to know blessedness and not oneself to enjoy it, is a state of disunity, of unhappiness” (Feuerbach 1957 [1841]: 18). The human animal becomes alienated from itself. Feuerbach’s primary aim is thus to expose the process of projection in order that the epistemic claims of religion might slip away. Recognizing projection at work enables humans to find new ways of being that are not in thrall to the dictates of the illusory God, and happiness is now a real possibility, the values identified in God being firmly located in the human world.

Feuerbach’s analysis suggests something of the political ideals that accompany the attempt to investigate theism through a psychological lens, and contemporary feminist philosophers of religion have seized on the possibilities inherent in the idea of projection in order to shape their critiques of the masculinist shape of theism (see Daly 1986; Welch 1989; Jantzen 1996, 1998). As Mary Daly argues, if the one doing the projecting is a male subject then the God who is subsequently created will be framed along masculine lines and will almost inevitably support ideas of male superiority (Daly 1975: 227). The political implications of this kind of psychological approach owe much to the work of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) and Karl Marx (1818–83), and it is worth exploring the tools they provide.

Nietzsche, the self-proclaimed “first psychologist” (Nietzsche 2004 [1888]: 101), launches an explicitly psychological dissection of the emotional baggage that underpins the theist’s God. Far from being anti-religious, Nietzsche’s bile is directed explicitly at the *Christian* God. Islam is praised for being hierarchical and anti-equality (Nietzsche 1998 [1886]: §30), and the old pagan gods of Greece and Rome are seen by this self-confessed follower of Dionysus as celebrating the values of strength and nobility (Nietzsche 1990 [1895]: §16). Christianity (and Judaism) is rejected as life-denying, promoting values derived from a sickness of soul. The Christian “obsession,” as Nietzsche sees it, with defining God as pure goodness reveals a refusal to engage with key aspects of expe-

rience such as violence, power and aggression. Such features are, he argues, fundamental to human experience and thus the “good old God” of Christian formulation (to use a phrase of Lacan’s) is rejected on the grounds that it provides a life-denying refusal to accept life in all its aspects (Nietzsche 1990 [1895]: §18).

The Christian God as defined by Nietzsche is a poisonous presence derived from a sick mind. At root, it emerges from a “slave morality,” which is “the revolt of everything that crawls along the ground directed against that which is *elevated*” (Nietzsche 1990 [1895]: §43). It is the creation of the weak and incapable. Glorifying the values of the weak—pity, compassion, *ressentiment*—allows the weak to dominate the strong, making “an ideal out of opposition to the preservative instincts of strong life” (Nietzsche 1990 [1895]: §5). Here Nietzsche departs from Feuerbach: the Christian concept of God, far from reflecting the best human values, reflects what is worst about human beings: self-pity, envy and fear. To accept the possibilities inherent in humanity, the God that supports such failings must be rejected.

Marx’s analysis might develop the political consequences of alienation more explicitly than Nietzsche, but his distinctiveness lies in his awareness of the powerful psychological support religious perspectives provide for the sufferer. In making this claim, he builds upon Feuerbach’s comment: “The more empty life is, the fuller, the more concrete is God . . . Only the poor man has a rich God” (Feuerbach 1957 [1841]: 73). For Marx, it is important to understand the compensation that religion provides the poor, and in this way his writing is defined by a more sympathetic quality than that found in Nietzsche. Religious compensation might be illusory, religion acting as a narcotic which dulls the senses to the necessity of the class-struggle, but this does not undermine the power religion has to offer the suffering a degree of hope in a hopeless world. Recognizing the desire for some kind of compassionate response provides the context for his most famous comment on religion: “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people” (Marx 1957: 37). Acknowledging the power of religion to provide psychological support does not undermine the work of criticism which must lead to the eradication of religion. Far be it, for religion provides individuals and groups with a distraction to the real work of liberation. In offering a sop to suffering, religious beliefs and practices stop people from responding effectively to their situation. In particular, the offer of an illusory happiness after death ignores the possibilities of happiness in the here-and-now. But in making these connections Marx raises an interesting possibility for understanding the relationship between the concept of God and the human dimension. The tenacity of belief in God cannot be understood without consideration of its connection to the need for psychic security.

The Psychological Approach in the Psychoanalytic Critique

With Freud’s “discovery” of psychoanalysis (McGrath 1986), the psychological approach to theism takes on its recognizably contemporary form. Freud (1856–1939) can be seen as merely developing the Feuerbachian model and supporting the atheistic critiques of Nietzsche and Marx, but this analysis does scant justice to the richer possibilities allowed for by his approach. If Marx hints at the necessity of psychic security while seeing religion as providing a (albeit illusory) form of this, Freud gives this reading its fullest expression. Read thus, Freud’s ideas provide the basis for a rather more positive engagement with religion than one might suppose if one focuses only on the more famous elements of his critique.

Feuerbach's analysis of theism suggested something of the precarious nature of the human animal. Not entirely comfortable in the animal world, detached from its environment by the very processes that aid the achievement of self-consciousness, it finds itself alienated from the world that first gave rise to it. In similar vein, exposing the tensions at the heart of the human animal forms the backdrop for the psychoanalytic account of human being. In Freud's early work, the central place given to the investigation of dreams (1900) lends itself to a particular construction of what it is to be human. Dreams are defined as the fulfillment of unconscious wishes, with humans coming to be viewed as "wishing animals" whose mental lives are formed by the interplay between desire and fear. As R. D. Hinshelwood suggests, this tension provides the context for the psychoanalytic account of human nature, and he notes that: "the history of psychoanalysis has been one of trying to understand the core anxiety of the human condition" (Hinshelwood 1989: 218).

Read in this way, Freud's attempt to understand the origins of religion is more than a mere side-show to his wider theories. His investigation of the psychological origins of the "religious impulse" relate directly to his general anthropology. As he develops his distinctive theory and method, he turns his attention to the origins of theism as a key mechanism for managing existential anxiety. The experience of being human unfolds against the backdrop of a threatening and perplexing world. Frail in comparison to other animals, burdened with the dependency of a lengthy infancy, the human animal is prey to a host of indeterminate fears and anxieties. The forces of nature, which Freud describes as those "elements which seem to mock all human control" (Freud 1927: 11), form the backdrop for human experience. Alongside the development of human civilization as a bulwark against these natural forces through enabling the construction of a social network of support for the puny individual, religion provides a mental framework for feeling secure in the world. The social and the psychological thus work in tandem. As he details the history of religion, Freud suggests that all religious constructions draw their power from the attempt to personalize and "humanize" nature, and this reaches its apotheosis in the structures of monotheism. There is a telling logic to this process by which the divine takes on a human aspect: the forces of nature, if humanized, can be appeased and propitiated. Far from being powerless in the face of blind natural forces, it is possible to bargain with them in the self-same way that a bargain can be struck with another human being (Freud 1927: 24; also Guthrie 1993).

What is most significant in Freud's analysis is less his rather grand—and, it must be said, rather dubious—discussion of the historical origins of religion (Freud 1913), and more his claims about the way the experiences of infancy feed into the concept of God. Infancy, as he draws it, it is a period of extreme anxiety as the child attempts to move into the external adult world. Writing at the beginning of the twentieth century and reflecting the social structures of his day, the central figure in the child's universe is the father (an idea that suggests something of his failure to engage sufficiently with the role the mother plays in the child's developing world (see Olivier 1989; Jonte-Pace 2001)). In order to find some kind of security, the child views the father as all-powerful, capable of providing protection from the threats perceived in the external world. Identification with the power of the father—worked out in different ways for the boy and girl (Freud 1925)—is never wholly given up as the child becomes an adult. The external world remains a potentially threatening place, the desire for a protector does not abate, and the qualities once found in the human father are taken up into the model for an even greater father figure: namely, the father-god whose protection is ever-available (Freud 1927: 30).

Locating the impetus for the concept of God in the psychic processes of childhood suggests something of the complexity of theism as construed by Freud. The father is never simply constructed as a protective figure. The child might long for the protection of his father, but “he” also develops an ambivalent attitude towards him: particularly in relation to his feelings for his mother. (And we should note that Freud’s child is invariably, at least in the early period of his writing, male (Freud 1900: 256). Subsequent pressure from female analysts led him to formulate the experience of girls as different from the experience of boys (see Appignanesi and Forrester 2005: 430–54).) Against the backdrop of the formulation of the Oedipus complex, the child’s image of the father is defined by desire and fear. Possessor of the desired mother, the father is feared as the one who could punish the child for his desires (and as Freud’s theory deals primarily with male sexual development, the punishment feared is peculiarly male: namely, castration (Freud 1924)). For our purposes, it is not necessary to delve more deeply into the vicissitudes of the Oedipus complex: all that should be noted is that Freud makes these feelings of guilt and fear the basis for the construction of both the Father and the Father-God. The God who has the power to save is also the God who can punish and whose death is desired. The God who protects is also the God who can destroy/castrate (and in the case of women, castration has already taken place; thus the girl’s lack of a penis stands as a clear warning to the boy of what will happen if he disobeys the father).

The God who emerges from Freud’s theorizing might be a wishful illusion, but it is a concept not entirely located in the wishful desires of the developing child. It is an idea created out of the stresses and strains of infancy, love *and* guilt, and desire *and* fear; and this mix of emotions accounts for the doctrines of divine punishment and retribution, as well as salvation and love. This suggests something of the rather more complex model provided by Freud. To claim that religion is a form of wish-fulfillment is not to suggest that it only meets needs in a positive way. It also reflects deep-seated anxieties about one’s place in the world.

Of course, emphasizing the complexity of the model is not enough to persuade the critic of its value. The extent to which the reader is willing to follow the thread of Freud’s analysis depends largely upon the extent to which the broader thrust of psychoanalytic theory is accepted. Mapping the conceptualizing process psychoanalytically involves engaging with hypothesized childhood fears and desires; a problematic focus, given that these fears and desires are, according to the theory, subject to the processes of repression and thus forgotten (Freud 1915). The psychoanalyst, with the religious believer, has, in the last resort, to take a leap of faith when it comes to such matters (although recent psychoanalytic research has sought to provide empirical basis for psychoanalytic theories (see Fonagy and Target 2002)). Even if one becomes convinced of the veracity of such ideas, it does not mean that to accept the psychic processes which lead to the conceptualizing of God eradicates the possibility of a God existing as a form distinct from the ideas that humans might have about “Him.”

To base one’s appraisal of psychoanalytic claims on identifying the reductionism of the genetic fallacy—ostensibly committed here—would, perhaps, be a mistake. Freud’s scientism might lead him to such basic errors, but to over-emphasize their importance in a reading of his work is to ignore aspects of his analysis that provide more fertile ground for the investigation of religion. Of particular interest is the location of the power of the idea of God in the struggles that face all human beings, regardless of their historical placing or social status. Death, suffering, guilt and anxiety are fundamental to the human experience of the world. In recent years, theorists have suggested that Freud’s

ideas on the uncanny (1919) form an important part of his discussion of religion. Experiences that might be termed “uncanny” include haunting, *déjà vu*, the *doppelganger*, and the sense that “I have been here before.” Freud’s attempt to understand such experiences focuses on their unsettling nature. Such experiences parallel the sense of unease that arises from the more general anxiety of being human. More than that, the uncanny involves the experience of something strange and unfamiliar which, when analyzed, is revealed to be rather more familiar than might initially seem to be the case. This leads Freud to conclude that the presence of the uncanny denotes “the return of the repressed” (Freud 1915: 154). Such experiences might seem out of the ordinary, but their peculiar and troubling quality is shaped by the remembrance of something from the past forcing itself back into the conscious mind. This discussion gives rise to a crucial question that positions Freud more explicitly alongside the attempts of Feuerbach, Marx and Nietzsche to explore the relationship between God and the psyche: how are humans to feel “at home in the uncanny” (Freud 1927: 17)? The significance of this question is revealed in Freud’s original German. In defining the uncanny (the “*unheimlich*”) Freud raises the question of how to feel at home in that which is, literally, the “unhomely.” Posing this question directs us back to an analysis of religious formulations and back to Feuerbach. “God,” in Feuerbach’s analysis, enables the development of human values and self-awareness: albeit at the cost of connection with the natural world. What Freud suggests is that in the formulation of the idea of God, believers find a way of feeling safe once more in a world that threatens to overwhelm them.

This notion can be taken further. The idea of God can never be reduced to an academic pursuit, because the discussion of religious frameworks and beliefs have at their root the attempt to deal with the experiences that arise from being a vulnerable human being. The psychological approach to theism forces a return to the heart of this experience: no longer a question detached from human experiences of death and fear, hope and desire, the idea of God becomes part of the psychic framework that develops as a way of coping with these experiences and emotions.

Developments in Psychoanalysis

Engaging with Freud’s ideas need not, then, necessitate dismissing the importance of religion or the idea of God for understanding the human animal. Moreover, an exploration of psychoanalysis more broadly constructed enables the discussion of theism to take on a deeper hue. Psychoanalysis is primarily a form of practice, and this practical edge enables religious ideas to be located in the lived experience of the individual. In what follows, something of the rich sources provided by psychoanalytic theory for a more complex account of God will be explored.

Psychoanalysis might have been Freud’s invention, but it is never his alone, and the ideas of many analysts frame its theory and practice. This process of development has not always been easy. In common with the history of organized religion, psychoanalysis has seen its fair share of schism and conflict (Mitchell and Black 1996), and this is particularly the case in the debate over how best to approach religious ideas and claims.

Carl G. Jung’s (1875–1961) refusal to accept the centrality given to sexuality in Freud’s theorizing led to the division between (Freudian) psychoanalysis and (Jungian) “analytic psychology” (Palmer 1997; Sayers 2003: 61–92). Connected to this dispute was Jung’s increasing commitment to the idea that religion provides a creative context for the transformation of the personality (Jung 1977 [1956]). As this idea developed, he

accorded a central role to the image of God. Locating the “God-image” in the processes of the psyche, Jung, like Freud, located the divine not in the external world but in the thought processes of the individual. But there is a significant difference: rather than seek to overcome the power of the God idea by exposing its all-too-human origins, Jung saw it, instead, as a symbol for the integrated personality. “God” provides a psychological template for the pursuit of wholeness (Jung 1993).

While it is important to recognize the differences between Freud and Jung, it would be a mistake to assume that Freudian psychoanalysis remained resolutely committed to the desirability of a non-religious world as expressed in some of Freud’s polemic (1927: 46–56). Recent developments in Freudian psychoanalysis suggest a rather more constructive approach to religious ideas. The most significant landmark in this new rapprochement is found in David Black’s recent collection of essays on the relationship between psychoanalysis and religion (2006). This volume includes essays on the Christmas story, the book of Job and the place of God in the mind. This renewed engagement does not come from nowhere; rather, it arises from a rather different thread in the psychoanalytic investigation of religion.

Given Freud’s status as progenitor, it is not entirely surprising that his ideas are often taken as the final word on psychoanalytic perspectives on God and religion. Even if the pre-eminence of Freud’s approach is accepted, it is important to note with commentators such as Salman Akhtar (with O’Neil 2009) and Bruno Bettelheim (1983) that Freud’s attitude to religion is more nuanced than his major works on the matter suggest. For example, Freud’s correspondence with the Protestant pastor Oskar Pfister suggests a much less dogmatic attitude to religious belief. At one point he writes that psychoanalysis is “neither religious nor non-religious, but an impartial tool which both priest and layman can use in the service of the sufferer” (9 February 1909, in E. Freud 1960: 17). Such comments might be viewed as attempts to avoid offending a religious friend, but taken alongside his life-long fascination with Moses (Freud 1914, 1939) they might suggest a Freud who cannot quite reject all religious expression. As Akhtar notes, “Freud is arguing with himself . . . [and] the *Illusion* monograph is a literary battlefield where ‘Freud the Atheist’ is involved in a bloody conflict with ‘Freud the Believer!’” (O’Neil and Akhtar 2009: 3).

Regardless, Freud’s position is not definitive when it comes to providing a psychological account of theism. His contemporary, William James, avoided blanket conclusions about the worth of religious views, preferring to describe “the varieties of religious experience” and how they related to the specific character traits and attitudes of those who had them (James 1985 [1902]). Describing such experiences need not necessitate coming to any particular judgment on their veracity. Considering religion as it emerges in human life and experience rather than as something which provides a set of doctrines to be accepted or refuted shapes the work of some of the most significant analysts who followed Freud and whose work holds out the possibility of a more constructive psychology of religion.

Arguably the most important of these is Donald Winnicott (1896–1971). Winnicott, like Freud, locates the forces that shape religious perspectives in the world of the developing child. The child must learn to negotiate between inner and outer worlds, and does this through acquiring an object which exists between itself and the mother/world and which shares aspects of each. This can be a toy, a blanket, even a sound (Winnicott 1971: 5). The chosen object shares features of both worlds, allowing for connection between what is experienced as inside and as outside the child. The object both “is” and “is not” the child. Eventually, the object is put aside but it is never totally

rejected: rather, “it loses meaning, and this is because the transitional phenomena have become diffused, have become spread out over the whole intermediate territory between ‘inner psychic reality’ and ‘the external world as perceived by two persons in common,’ that is to say, over the whole cultural field” (Winnicott 1971: 7). In this intermediate territory the space for play and creativity opens up; and Winnicott explicitly connects this space with religious feeling (Winnicott 1971; also Ulanov 2001). Here, it is possible to play with the relationship between what is inside and what is outside. Religion becomes important in this context because the establishment of the relationship between inside and outside is never finally complete:

The task of reality-acceptance is never completed . . . no human being is free from *the strain* of relating inner and outer reality, and . . . relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience . . . which is not challenged (arts, religion, etc.).

(Winnicott 1971: 18; my emphasis)

Religion provides a safe space where self and world can be felt as one; where it is possible to retain that first illusory sense of connection between thought and the world from when the mother’s response to the child’s needs was read by the child as evidence that it could, through thought alone, influence and control the external world. In a world that can seem chaotic and senseless, religion provides a place for psychic security. A similar approach is found in Wilfred Bion’s work. According to Bion (1897–1979), religious “at-one-ment” with “O” or “ultimate reality” could transform the chaotic experiences brought to him by his patients (Bion 1965; Sayers 2003: 216–23). “God” aids the attempt to integrate the messiness of experience, allowing the analyzand to find a path through the things which threaten to overwhelm.

Approaching Theism in the Contemporary World

Two interconnected themes have shaped this account of psychology and theism: the early attempts to locate religion in the psychological processes of the human individual, and the later development of psychoanalysis as a theory and method for providing therapeutic solutions to the tensions inherent in being human. Recent developments in experimental psychology which locate religious attitudes in the findings of neuroscience have not been considered.

This might appear to be a glaring omission. After all, the attempt to reveal the chemical forces supporting the brain’s construction of “God” could be viewed as enabling the possibility of establishing the truth or otherwise of the claims habitually made about God’s reality. For some, this kind of investigation will be crucial, in line with the truth-seeking tasks of analytic philosophy of religion. The line of enquiry pursued here has more in common with the demands of moral philosophy to find pathways through life. Describing the history of this approach enables theistic ideas to be located within the web of concerns that shape human consciousness. So, for Feuerbach, “God” aids the development of an internal conversation where the values of any given life or society are given dramatic form. For Freud, the concept helps articulate the fears and desires of the growing child. For Winnicott (and also Bion), the development of a transitional space between self and world allows for creativity and religious expression; enabling the self to find a way of being “at home” in a world of chance and change.

Shifting the focus to the descriptive concerns of neuroscience will not help an engagement with these fundamental human experiences of love, fear, loss, desire, death. Mapping the brain will not provide answers to the questions all ask about the meaning of their existence or to the things and activities that color and frame the anxiety and delight that attends to being alive.

A passage from D. H. Lawrence is worth exploring in order to get at the tensions between a scientific paradigm that loses sight of the individual's fears and desires, and the kind of approach which locates the ideas of theism in the needs of humanity: "Eat and carouse with Bacchus, or munch dry bread with Jesus, but don't sit down without one of the gods" (cited in Pope 1991: 155). Subjected to an analytical eye, these words are meaningless. But to address them in this way is to ignore Lawrence's concern with the *religious* significance of human creativity. What he provides is a wonderfully evocative depiction of the sacred nature of human existence, where even the most basic human activities can be interpreted through the lens of the divine. Each human life can strive to engage with that divine impulse, for each life is precious and meaningful, and it matters little for an artist such as Lawrence whether that sense of the divine is identified with the asceticism of Jesus or the orgy of Dionysus. The religious impulse is located in the deepest aspects of humanity; those things that cannot be escaped and which demand to be heard. Religion emerges from the attempt to engage with the most basic hopes and desires, fears and anxieties. And it is here that the idea of God finds its importance in shaping a sense of the well-lived life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a return can be made to a more obviously philosophical figure, namely Descartes. Identifying God as the author of his existence leads Descartes to recognize his utter dependence (Descartes 1968 [1641]: 127). To be human is to be vulnerable and contingent. By denoting God as the eternal and infinite, Descartes highlights, at the same time, the finitude and transience of human life. Identifying the psychological needs that give rise to the concept of God need not lead to the end of religion or the rejection of God, but it does demand that the vulnerabilities of being human in this fragile and shifting world be addressed. To do so offers the possibility of a deeper understanding of the relationship between humanity and world; an understanding that can get lost when the importance of God is connected only to questions of verification. In the psychology of theism the connection between God and the human is made explicit, and in the exploration of this connection it becomes possible to think again about what it means to be human in a fragile and changing world.

Related Topics

Chapter 11: Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Intellectual Life; Chapter 13: Evidence; Chapter 14: Naturalism; Chapter 17: Evolution; Chapter 22: Sociology; Chapter 26: Cognitive Science; Chapter 30: Arguments About Human Persons; Chapter 51: Happiness

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Recommended Reading

- Black, D. (ed.), (2006) *Psychoanalysis and Religion in the 21st Century: Competitors or Collaborators?*, London: Routledge. David Black's edited collection offers a range of perspectives on the changing relationship between psychoanalysis and religion. Including articles by leading psychoanalysts, it suggests something of the move beyond Freud in psychoanalytic perspectives on religion.
- O'Neil, M. K. and S. Akhtar (eds), (2009) *On Freud's "Future of an Illusion,"* London: Karnac. O'Neil and Akhtar present a range of reflections by psychoanalysts on how to read Freud's most famous critique of religion.
- Palmer, M. (1997) *Freud and Jung on Religion*, London: Routledge. Michael Palmer's reading of Freud and Jung suggests ways in which each responds to the meaning of religion, and provides a good introduction to their differing perspectives on religious faith and belief.

RELIGIOUS STUDIES AND THEOLOGY

Alan G. Padgett

A chapter with this title might have two purposes, and thus differing fundamental questions, depending upon how we imagine the direction of relationship between the two main areas of theism on the one hand, and theology and religious studies on the other. We could wonder what theologians and other scholars of religion have made of the concept of “theism,” and surrounding debates. In other words, we could look at theism carefully within the disciplines of theology and religious studies. This first way has, fortunately, already been covered for us in earlier chapters of this Companion, several of which, in discussing theism, already drew implicitly on the comparative theology of several religions and religious philosophies. This means they also drew upon the larger discipline of comparative religions. Because we can happily assume their work in this chapter, we do not have to follow the first way, the way which thinks about theism. Instead, we will follow the second way in this chapter. In other words, we will examine theology and religious studies from the point of view of theistic faith-and-reason. Thus our way in this chapter will be from theism to theology and religious studies. This journey necessarily raises some key questions, none of which have established answers among scholars, and all of which are vigorously debated by experts. What is religious studies? What is theology? Are they different branches of the same tree in the groves of Academe, or different species however related? Perhaps most controversially, what role does faith-based reasoning play in both—if any? To answer these questions, it will be necessary (however odd this might appear) to ponder what science is as an academic inquiry, and to consider briefly some broad themes in the methodology or rationality of the sciences. This is because to examine any academic discipline or science from the point of view of a robust religious faith is already to raise the issue of faith-and-reason, or if you like, a faith-based rationality within the sciences. After a very brief detour in this conflicted domain, we will then be able to examine more carefully theology and religious studies as academic disciplines in relation to theism, or perhaps better said, the role of theistic faith in both theology and religious studies.

What is a Science?

If only there was a simple (or even complex!) definition of science that scientists and scholars in science studies agreed upon, our first concern would be made much easier.

If only Karl Popper's definition, for example, or the later ones by Polanyi or Kuhn, had swept the field of opposition, we could simply assume it and move on (Popper 1959 [1935]; Polanyi 1958; Kuhn 1970). Alas, this is not the case. Items from all these thinkers are widely accepted, indeed, but a *definition* of science in the strict and demarcating sense has not been. Despite a great deal of first-class philosophical and historical research, no standard definition is to be had of either science or religion. *C'est la vie* or perhaps we should say, *c'est la philosophie*.

Fortunately for us, we don't really need to consider and resolve these current debates about what science is. Instead, we can rely on an older definition in English, one still current in most Continental languages such as French or German ("Science, n." 2010). In this older sense the English word "science" is not reduced to natural sciences, or even to the natural and social sciences. Rather, a science can be *any* serious and sustained academic inquiry, with an established body of knowledge that is open to a community of experts for review and critical examination based on reason and evidence, along with accepted methods for extending it with new proposals and discoveries. When I mean the word in this older sense, I will use the capital S. In this older sense, both philosophy and history are Sciences, for example, thus extending the range of meaning quite far relative to current American usage. This older definition is crucial to our discussion of the character and rise of religious studies, as we will see. I will use it frequently in this chapter.

The Rise of Religious Studies in Western Academia

In the long history of Western theology, religious studies is a rather recent phenomenon. Theology as an academic Science dates back to the founding of universities such as Oxford and Paris. By comparison, religious studies as a distinct branch of learning is a product of the late nineteenth century. What we mean by religious studies or comparative religion today was first formally advocated by the brilliant and influential professor F. Max Müller (1823–1900). For him the definition was straightforward: the Scientific study of all the religions of humanity, without prejudice toward any one of them. Hume had proposed already in the eighteenth century a "natural history" of religion (Hume 1757; see further Wheeler-Barclay 2010: 1–36). Müller's later proposal was for nothing less than a *Science* of religion that included critical historical work, which, like the science of language, is necessarily comparative and textual (Müller 1899 [1873]: 4–8). His work, along with others of his era, provided the historical origin of our concept of religious studies or comparative religion as an academic discipline (Capps 1995; Wheeler-Barclay 2010).

Müller himself tells us that the idea of a scientific study of religion did not originate with him; the history of religion as a Scientific study was taught in German universities when he was a student. Yet it did not cover the full range of religion as a human phenomenon: it referred only to the academic study of the religion of the Bible, i.e. of Jews and Christians (Müller 2002 [1870]: 353). In such academic courses on the history of religion, other religions were not even considered *religion*, but mere myth and superstition. Müller set about successfully to establish a new Science on a comparative, historical and global basis, one that would truly encompass all humankind. The idea of a scientific study of religion was quickly taken up by anthropologists and other social scientists and scholars (Capps 1995; Wheeler-Barclay 2010). Since the goal was to study all religions as a human phenomenon, common to every known culture, past and

present, this Science must be comparative. As such, it cannot favor any one religion, or at least it *should* not for truth's sake. No biases for or against religion, nor in favor of any religion, can be accepted into a Science of religion if it is to be truly Scientific. If bias and "preconceived theories, whether by the friends or enemies of religion" are allowed into the difficult and interdisciplinary Scientific study of religion, "the sense of truth, the very life of all science, is sacrificed, and serious mischief will follow without fail" (Müller 2002 [1870]: 102; see also Müller 1899 [1873]: 28). While Müller himself in his lectures sometimes showed a bias toward Christianity (e.g., Müller 1899 [1873]: 28), he was steady in his insistence that in "a comparative study of religions . . . Science wants no partisans" (ibid.). The basic principle of religious neutrality, that is, an absence of bias for or against any religion in this careful Science of religion, was established and quickly agreed upon by researchers in this new field. It is still part of the core Scientific values of this interdisciplinary and comparative academic study of religion as a human phenomenon. When the word "science" was reduced to the natural and social sciences, this human-focused Science was variously called history of religion, comparative religion, philosophy of religion, or simply religious studies (Capps 1995).

This raises a key question for any thoughtful theist: if a scholar of religion is a theist, might she bring her faith into the Scientific study of religion? Or is any particular religious faith excluded by a kind of methodological humanism? If so why; and if not, why not? Answering these questions will take us back for a moment into the history and philosophy of science, especially into issues concerned with the character of science as a rational human practice and tradition of inquiry.

Science, Faith and Rationality

We have seen that those who established a Science of religion, and scholars today who continue to be experts in comparative religion, religious studies, or comparative theology (i.e. comparative religious philosophies) all reject the idea of bias on the part of a researcher towards *any* religion or worldview—perhaps most especially their own. But can any Science be truly objective? Is it really possible to abstract from one's own deeply held values completely? Is the true goal of any Science value-free and neutral objectivity in the quest for pure logic and truth alone? There has been a massive debate on this topic by many important philosophers in the twentieth century. Any attempt to summarize this debate would take us far off our current course and purpose. While no consensus has emerged in the history and philosophy of science concerning these important questions, a few broadly received perspectives will be all we need for our purposes here (see further Padgett 2003).

The notion of a value-free science has largely been replaced by a greater appreciation for the fact that all the academic disciplines or Sciences are, in fact, *human practices* which take place within *established traditions of inquiry* (Kuhn 1970; Polanyi 1959; Lakatos 1978; MacIntyre 2006: 3–23). To learn a natural or human science is not to be trained in pure *a priori* logical reasoning or in universal axiomatic systems of deductive truth, but is closer to being apprenticed into any valuable skill which requires mentoring into a community of experts: thinking, insight, growth in knowledge and hard work. A student of any specialized Science is thus inducted into a community of truth-seeking fellow scientists, whose reasoning is shaped by that tradition of inquiry. No science is without presuppositions and important values that shape its methodology, or if you like, its rationality (McMullin 1982). The epistemological values that are embedded in the

contingent, historical and humanly constructed Sciences (academic disciplines) are not pure noetic truths—at least not most of them—yet with successful and fruitful sciences they should be given *prima facie* epistemic warrant unless there is some reason to doubt them (see further Padgett 2003: 167–94).

Another implication of this set of conclusions from the philosophy and history of science is that the nineteenth-century dream of a pure logical rationality, a scientific thinking that was value-free and in-principle universal, has been overturned. There is no “view from nowhere” in an epistemology that knows what it is about. While there is thus no perfectly neutral and value-free rationality, the alternative is not the oft-feared relativism of anything goes. Rather, a modest objectivity which sees this as a communal goal and a practice within a tradition of inquiry, which among other goals values careful and rigorous attention *to the object of study* is one quite reasonable option in keeping with the aims and discoveries of modern science over time (Padgett 2012). Such a “practical objectivity” agrees that the values embedded in a Scientific community are not absolute, *a priori* truths, but deserve nevertheless our epistemological respect. We should adopt them when investigating their area of expertise, unless significant reasons cause us to doubt a specific one or its proper application.

Finally, we can see that while such traditions of inquiry provide important elements in any worldview that hopes to be scientific, no Science or set of Sciences is, itself, a complete worldview. Thus room exists for the deepest values and commitments of an individual researcher to shape, and be shaped by, the more focused and narrow discoveries and values of their particular expertise. This final point cannot be emphasized enough in the context of our present question, where issues of faith, reason, values and rationality loom large. Sure, no discipline as a whole will share all of our values or complete worldview; but there is room for the larger worldview of the researcher to influence Science in a rational, logical manner. This is what I and Robert J. Russell mean by the “mutuality” of theology and science (Padgett 2003; Russell 2008). Larger commitments and accepted truths are bound to influence the rational investigator at the boundaries and edges of their Scientific pursuits, just because a rational person will allow other truths to influence things like theory-choice among otherwise equally good theories. Of course higher-level epistemological values can and should over-rule such background commitments when there is a clearly demonstrable truth or best theory to be had—but at the growing edges of Science this is usually not the case. The scientist is, in such situations, perfectly rational in allowing her worldview to influence areas where one looks for new discoveries, or one’s best hunch as to which theory among currently disputed ones might win out over the long run.

To see this clearly it is important to make two distinctions. First we have to distinguish between the rational commitments and methods of a whole tradition, and the necessarily larger beliefs, values and knowledge of individual experts in that Science. In other words, we have to distinguish between the individual scientist and the larger community of scholars, classic texts, accepted paradigms and practices that make up the discipline as a whole. Second, we have to distinguish between two ways in which larger truths and values from the individual’s worldview might influence their Scientific activity: implicitly as a background to the informal logic of their specific Science; or explicitly, when the researcher adds their own personal commitments to the content of their scientific arguments, explanations and publications. We will argue here that the first way in which theistic faith can influence religious studies is rational and should be accepted by experts; the second way, on the other hand, is contrary to the best traditions of the Science of religion.

With these definitions, distinctions and qualifications, we are now ready to consider three vexed questions in the contemporary debate about the academic methods and differences between theology and religious studies. All these questions spark a large debate among experts in either field. First, what difference if any exists between theology and religious studies? Second, does theology as a Science presuppose the faith-commitments of a specific religion? Third, should the individual faith or worldview of the researcher be brought into the Scientific study of Religion?

Theology and Religious Studies as Sciences

It is well-known that since the founding of universities in Europe, and indeed before then, theology was understood to be a spiritual practice, a form of religious wisdom, and a “science” (*scientia*). We cannot review here the long story of academic theology among Jews, Christians and Muslims in the millennium in which such a view was widely accepted. But we can and should take note that for most of this period, from roughly 900–1900 CE, scholars in all three religious traditions saw theology as a *scientia* that was based explicitly upon a particular religious faith. Muslim, Jewish and Christian theology as *academic disciplines* built upon the standard forms of God’s revelation which each religion accepted and embodied (Evans 1980; Burrell 1986; Stroumsa 2009 among many others).

Specific Faith and Theological Science

There are many ways of defining the goals and methods of theology as a Science, that is, as an academic discipline. Traditionally, theology would be the academic and conceptual stream of a religious tradition. In the Abrahamic faiths, the shortest definition of theology is simply the knowledge of God (faith and revelation being assumed). As such, it is always explicitly based upon the particular faith and revelation (or source of enlightenment) found in that religion. Theology would in this case be wholly rational and wholly faith-full. There are, however, more descriptive and less tradition-based understandings of theology. These views either explicitly or implicitly are influenced by the Science of religion, seeking to “do theology” in a way that respects and draws from any and all religious wisdom, wherever it might be found (Ford 2005: 61–3, 78; Wiebe 1999). There is nothing precisely *wrong* with this more modern, pluralistic notion of theology, although I would prefer to call it “comparative theology” and situate it within religious studies (Clooney 2010). But it automatically leaves out any truths that might be discovered only on the basis of accepting the faith, spirituality and sources of revelation (enlightenment) *within* a particular religion. Second, because this theological approach does not reside fully within a particular religious and spiritual community, its suggestions for new theories and practices, and revisions of old ones, will always be limited to some degree. Still, the descriptive task of theology understood as embracing any and all religious wisdom will be a valuable and interesting study—even if we need to carefully distinguish this discipline from the traditional, faith-based rationality of theology as normally understood.

In the rest of this chapter, I will use “theology” as a Science to mean a fully rational and fully faith-full inquiry of the mind, heart and spirit, done within a specific religion. I will call the more modern and pluralistic concept of theology “comparative theology” to distinguish it from the traditional *scientia* which has for centuries been called

theologia. As a Science, theology will naturally be done in community with other people of faith *and* those outside of that faith who are interested in academic dialog regarding it. There are, after all, specialists in biblical studies, church history, and Christian ethics who are not in fact Christians (to speak of the theologians I know best), and they add a rich variety of insights and perspectives. To be different is not *ipso facto* to be inferior or dubious.

Thus it is not too hard to make peace in the so-called “politics” (Wiebe 1999) of theology vs. religious studies; all we need allow is that there is more than one valid way to do theology and to study religion. Differing aims and areas of study will lead to different methodologies and epistemic values, but these two fields can be complementary rather than conflicting. All that a faith-based rationality would ask is that it also be respected, understood and read as a legitimate Science (we have to say “academic discipline” today) alongside the others (Placher 1989; Macdonald 2010). There does not have to be war between Christian theology, for example, and religious studies, when each can learn to appreciate and value the insights and differences of the other. What Christian academic theologians sometimes have to explain is simply the very idea of a faith-based rationality, especially to a secularist academy (Marsden 1997).

Theistic Faith and the Science of Religion

The irenic stance I recommend above between theology as a faith-based Science and the Science of religion is, perhaps, harder to sustain with respect to a final question: what place, if any, shall theistic faith play in the Science of religion? Here we should probably begin with an acceptance of the epistemic value and methodological descriptive goals of the Science of religion (now religious studies) as set out by Max Müller, and embraced by the field ever since. No religion or anti-religious view can be allowed precedence or preference. Whatever the worldview and philosophy of life the scholar might have as an individual, *in this Science no explicit faith is to be preferred or promoted over any other* (or any other non-religious view for that matter, such as atheism). We have called this “religious neutrality,” and I find it to be an important value for the limited goals of the Science of religion. This “neutrality” will not be embraced by any one individual scholar all the time but, rather, is a commitment of the whole community of scholars of religion *qua* academic community. Like the epistemic values in any mature science, those who begin to study comparative world religions as human phenomena are most rational who accept the procedures, practices, methods and broad conclusions already found in the various streams of thought within the tradition of the mature Science of religion. But the general rule of thumb, the *prima facie* acceptance of the rationality of a given Science in its limited domain of inquiry, has an important limit: it is rational to accept the goals, methods and values of a mature science *unless there is some reason to doubt them*. This point brings us to our last highly contested question: for those scholars of religion who embrace a lively theistic faith, is there good reason to doubt a traditional epistemic value found in the Science of religion, which we have named religious neutrality?

The first thing to be said, in answering this question, is that the epistemic principle of religious neutrality, embedded in the generations-long Scientific study of religion, has yielded a great deal of significant knowledge. Religious studies, as a discipline, has contributed a vast amount of knowledge and insight to our understanding of the human condition, to human societies, and to the common religious element found in them all. This is a valuable tradition which should not be lightly set aside.

Second, the principle of religious neutrality does not apply to every aspect of a Scientific approach to religion. We have argued for a complementarity and cooperative dialog between academic theology and religious studies; one based upon a specific rationality founded in a specific faith, the other embracing an effort to compare and study all religions without prejudice toward any of them. Both approaches to religion are equally valuable, and it depends completely on the kind of truth we are seeking, which should rightly be pursued by the individual scholar. If we are interested in descriptive and comparative study of the way all human cultures have responded to the Sacred, as they understand it, that is one thing (religious studies). If we seek greater wisdom and insight, greater knowledge of and spiritual connection with this sacred reality, that will require us to enter into the faith, spirituality, religious practices and way of life found in a specific religious community and tradition (theology).

Finally, we can agree that this “religious neutrality” is a kind of language game played by scholars of religion—a “game” only in the serious sense of Wittgenstein, that is, a language and “grammar” which is grounded in a whole way of life (what he called a “form of life”; Wittgenstein 1958). This further implies that the “grammar” of religious studies, which includes among other things the epistemic value of religious neutrality, will apply to a limited and focused area of religion—but a valuable and useful one nevertheless. As a descriptive, comparative, and human-focused academic discipline, religious studies cannot tell us everything we might want to know that is broadly “religious” in character. Yet this is the flip side of the very power of a particular speciality—it has a limited but deep grasp of some aspect of reality. All of the sciences derive their power from the narrow and fixed focus of their practical objectivity. This is both a limit and a great strength.

What I am concluding is this: in the famous debate between “insider” and “outsider” in the understanding of religion, *both* perspectives are important. The so-called “outsider” who values descriptive and scientific work has much to teach us; and yet so does the fervent practitioner (“insider”) of that particular spiritual Way. I find most of the either/or literature in this debate generates more heat than light (Knott 2005).

Thus the theist will want to bring his faith with him into the study of religion. And so must we all bring our deepest values and commitments with us when we enter into any Science. The specific insights brought by the theist into religious studies might provide some clues or suggestions as to where new information and insights can be gained in the Science of religion. But those insights and theories will need to be demonstrated to the community of religious studies *using the grammar of this Science*. The particulars of one’s own religion might provide an individual with insight; but to prove that to others, in that area of human study which is the chosen specialty of the Science of religion, the individual will need to adopt the methodology and specific epistemology of this community of scholars who profess many religions and none at all. Let us take an historical example. It could be that my own monotheism leads me to believe that the most primitive religion of the human race was monotheist. But in order to prove this historical claim, I will need more than an appeal to my own limited theological assumptions. I will need historical evidence, and will have to argue my point with equally learned colleagues who do not share my faith and assumptions. Here the “outsider” values of the Science of religion come to bear most centrally. I conclude that as long as we are seeking evidential knowledge of comparative religions, there is no reason to doubt the generations-old epistemic value of religious neutrality in the discipline of religious studies.

Finally, it must be noticed that were speaking here of a community of scholars adopting this limited version of religious neutrality together, for a specific purpose. A single investigator might, indeed, want to know more than religious studies can provide. She might want to follow the evidence, and her own growing sense of what is important about life in general, into domains that take her beyond the self-imposed evidential limits of the Science of religion. But this is perfectly fine for the individual who is seeking enlightenment. It could be, ironically, that the greatest and deepest questions that we broadly call “religious” will always take us beyond what religious studies can provide.

Related Topics

Chapter 4: Christianity; Chapter 13: Evidence; Chapter 15: Humanities; Chapter 38: Education

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Recommended Reading

- Capps, W. (1995) *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline*, Minneapolis: Fortress. This is one of the best surveys of the development of religious studies, and the various approaches and arguments surrounding it. Capps also presents his own perspective.
- Hinnells, J. R. (ed.), (2005) *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, London: Routledge. A fine collection of informative essays which provides an introduction to the current issues in the field.
- Müller, F. M. (2002) *The Essential Max Müller*, edited by J. R. Stone, London: Palgrave Macmillan. An excellent collection of essays from the most important early figure calling for a science of comparative religions. It also contains a useful introduction by the editor.
- Padgett, A. G. (2003) *Science and the Study of God*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. Several of the arguments made in this chapter depend upon conclusions made in this earlier work, comparing and contrasting the sciences with Christian theology.
- Wheeler-Barclay, M. (2010) *The Science of Religion in Britain, 1860–1915*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press. This volume focuses down on early debates within one nation, which provides a window into the origins of religious studies, and the debates and issues surrounding it.

MORAL INQUIRY

Michael W. Austin

Religion and ethics are often discussed in tandem. In the minds of many, religious beliefs and values are connected to moral beliefs and values in deep conceptual and substantial ways. Morality is thought by most theists to have a prominent place in human life, for a variety of reasons. For instance, many religious believers see the possibility of being moral as an opportunity to reflect the image (that is, the nature and character) of God. Some theists also believe that their fate in the afterlife is in some way related to the morality of their characters and actions in this life. Many theistic traditions include the belief that knowing, loving, and obeying God is the ultimate purpose of human existence, and that morality plays a crucial role in fulfilling this purpose. For example, medieval philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas argued that human fulfillment is constituted by knowing and loving God, and that this fulfillment is realized when we exemplify several important character traits, including the cardinal virtues of prudence, courage, temperance, and justice, as well as the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love (DeYoung et al. 2009).

There are several connections between theism and moral philosophy, in the metaphysical, epistemological, and practical realms (Beaty et al. 1998). Many theists believe that objective morality is metaphysically dependent upon God. This means that the existence of morality depends in some sense on the existence of God. Some theistic philosophers make use of this purported connection between God and ethics, arguing from the existence of objective morality to the existence of God by way of what is commonly referred to as the “moral argument” for theism (Linville 2009; Copan 2003). Not all theists believe that morality’s existence is dependent upon God’s existence (Swinburne 2009). I will bracket this debate in this chapter because the assumption that morality is dependent upon God is so widely shared among the followers of the theistic religions of the world. Moreover, I will make another assumption in this chapter which is shared by most theists, namely, that moral realism is true. For the moral realist, a moral claim like “Humility is a virtue” has the same metaphysical status as the claim “ $2 + 2 = 4$,” in the sense that both claims are true, and even if every human person believed that neither of these statements was true, they would remain so. Their truth status is not dependent upon the assent of human beings, either individually or collectively. At least that is what the moral realist believes.

However, it does not follow from the claim that morality’s existence is dependent upon God’s existence that a person must believe in God in order to know and do the right thing. Put more simply, atheists and agnostics can have moral knowledge and live morally decent lives. The metaphysical status of morality and our ability to know whether or not a particular moral claim is true are distinct issues. Many theists believe

that all of the created order, the entire universe, is ontologically dependent upon God's creative and sustaining power, but it does not follow from this that those who are not theists cannot come to know more about how the physical universe operates. Similarly, if there is an objective moral order of some sort, and if its existence somehow depends upon God's existence, it does not follow that one must believe in God in order to acquire moral knowledge regarding, for example, the wrongness of murder. Nor does this philosophical claim about the relationship between morality and God entail that a theist must directly consult God via special revelation such as the Bible or the Koran in order to acquire such knowledge.

The point that two individuals might disagree about the foundations of morality while agreeing on its content is worth considering before we examine some of the possible sources of moral knowledge in the next section. A similar observation was made by German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz with respect to logic and mathematics. Leibniz held the view that numbers and logical truths were ontologically dependent on God, existing in His mind. Leibniz faced the objection that if logical and mathematical truths exist as thoughts in the mind of God, then the atheist cannot know them, which is clearly not the case (Adams 1999: 355–6). Leibniz responded with the following:

[I]t is, in my judgement, the divine understanding which gives reality to the eternal verities . . . It is true that an atheist may be a geometrician: but if there were no God, geometry would have no object. And without God, not only would there be nothing existent, but there would be nothing possible. That, however, does not hinder those who do not see the connexion of all things one with another and with God from being able to understand certain sciences, without knowing their first source, which is in God.

(Leibniz 2009 [1710]: 243)

The point Leibniz is making is that one can understand certain eternal truths but not be aware of their basis in the mind of God. A person can know that " $2 + 2 = 4$," or that "two contradictory statements cannot both be true," without also knowing—as Leibniz claimed to know—that these propositions are true because they correspond to thoughts in the mind of God. The relevance of these points for this chapter is that when we consider the connections between theism and moral inquiry, we must not assume that those who believe the connections are quite strong also believe that only theists can possess moral knowledge or perform morally correct actions.

In what follows, I will focus on a subset of connections that exist between theism and moral inquiry. In particular, I will examine some of what I take to be the most important connections between theism and the quest for moral knowledge. This focus rules out non-cognitivist as well as relativist understandings of ethics, since both non-cognitivists and relativists reject the view of moral knowledge that I explore in this chapter which includes a commitment to some form of robust moral realism.

In Search of Moral Knowledge

There are many ways one might come to have some bit of moral knowledge whether or not one is a theist. Philosophers develop theories of moral knowledge in order to understand how this process might work as well as to evaluate the efficacy of a particular method of seeking such knowledge. Caroline Simon considers three positions regarding

moral knowledge and Christian theism: epistemic supernaturalism, epistemic naturalism, and rational intuitionism (Simon 1998). It seems to me that these three positions are also available to those within other theistic traditions such as Islam and Judaism, though Simon's concern is with which view of moral knowledge should be endorsed by Christian theists. Simon examines these three theories of moral knowledge in light of two general criteria: (i) compatibility with Christianity's central truths; and (ii) philosophical adequacy. She holds that all three views are compatible with the doctrines of Christianity, though all do not fare equally well with respect to the criterion of philosophical adequacy.

Epistemic supernaturalism is the view that for some moral claim to be an instance of moral knowledge, it must be validly inferred from non-moral propositions about the nature of God. There are many different supernaturalist theories of ethics, but they all have in common the view that moral knowledge is based on theological premises. So, if there is no God, there is no morality.

Divine command theory, which is the view that the criterion of right action is that it be commanded or required by God, is an example of epistemic supernaturalism (Austin 2006). On divine command theory, I am obligated to refrain from murder because this prohibition is communicated via special revelation (for example, by means of a canonical text or a personal religious encounter with God). The qualification is that one might believe that divine commands are sufficient for creating obligations, but also believe that moral knowledge is available via other sources, such as knowledge of human nature. Additionally, when making use of divine commands in the process of moral inquiry, several criteria have been suggested for helping guard against error: consistency with Scripture, consistency with other particular divine commands, consistency with the views of the broader Christian community, the impact of obeying such a command in one's daily experience over an extended period of time, and consistency with one's existing moral knowledge (Fletcher 1998).

Is epistemic supernaturalism compatible with the central truths of Christianity? Many Christian thinkers not only believe that the two are compatible, but go further and assert that only supernaturalism is compatible with Christian doctrine. This view is argued for in several ways, including but not limited to: (i) suspicion towards human reason unaided by Scripture; (ii) the supposition that if we humans could acquire moral knowledge on our own, then God's central place would be taken by human autonomy; and (iii) the notion that our moral judgments and theorizing are suspect due to the impact of the Fall on humanity, such that without supernatural grace we are tainted by rationalization and resentment. Our unwillingness to act in moral ways hinders our ability to think properly about what morality requires.

According to Simon, arguments of type (i) fail primarily because even if unaided human reason fails to grasp particular moral truths, it does not follow that we are in a state of complete moral ignorance. With respect to (ii), Simon points out that even if we are able to separate morality and theology, it does not follow that God will then disappear somehow. Perhaps a human being could learn that murder is wrong through the study of human nature and from special revelation. If so, this neither challenges the truth status of this moral belief nor exalts human autonomy above God. Finally, with respect to (iii), one can accept that the Fall has had an impact on our moral thinking and moral behavior without also accepting supernaturalism. Those who are naturalists or rational intuitionists can also accept the view that we are in need of grace in the realms of thought and action. Such acceptance does not entail that all moral truths

must be derived from theological premises, as the supernaturalist about moral knowledge maintains.

The notion that an adequate morality must be based on a truthful narrative might lend support to the philosophical adequacy of supernaturalism. If the only true narrative must include reference to God, then this would show that supernaturalism is true because a theistic story with theistic premises would be the basis of all moral knowledge. But there are many problems for this and for supernaturalism more generally. It is not clear, for example, that narrative dependence as described by some of its advocates is true. We can accept the significance of narrative, tradition, and community in ethics without also thinking that they are sufficient for understanding ethics, especially with respect to its foundations.

Another problem for all supernaturalist theories is that counterexamples come to mind of people who at the very least appear to have moral knowledge but do not have the theological knowledge that supernaturalists believe to be necessary for that moral knowledge. Their moral knowledge is based on some natural feature of the world, or perhaps is an instance of a rational intuition which enables them to see some self-evident moral truth quite apart from knowledge of God's character or commands.

Before discussing the other two views of moral knowledge, consider first another form of supernaturalism that is important but often underappreciated. This form of epistemic supernaturalism is another way that a theist could come to have moral knowledge and it is worth examining because it highlights a deficiency in how theists often appropriate sacred texts in moral inquiry.

Some theists tend to have an atomistic and naive view of revelation, at least in the Christian tradition. There are likely many reasons for this, including the insertion of chapter and verse numbers in the Bible, lack of attention to genre, and anti-intellectualism. One way to acquire a better understanding of the moral content of the Bible and thereby make use of it as a source of moral knowledge is to employ a redemptive-movement hermeneutical approach (Webb 2001; Copan 2008).

This interpretive approach to Scripture includes a progressive understanding of revelation, in the sense that there is a higher moral ideal which is the ultimate target of the ethical approach contained in the Bible. This approach captures the redemptive spirit within the text of the Bible as it calls people to a higher way of life within a multilevel ethic. The redemptive-movement approach first takes into account the moral state of the culture in which the Scripture at issue was produced. Next, it seeks to determine what sort of redemptive change is being called for by God to the people in that particular culture. Finally, when employing this approach, the reader then seeks to ascertain what the ultimate ethic is which constitutes the ideal we are to strive for and put into practice.

By way of illustration, consider the issue of slavery. In the context of the original culture in which the Old Testament slavery passages were written, slavery was prevalent and included numerous abuses. While Scripture allows a form of slavery, its teachings place moral limits on how slaves were to be treated and called for better overall conditions for slaves. For example, there are limits placed upon the physical treatment of slaves. The master who physically damaged his slave was obligated to give that slave freedom because of this immoral act. The ultimate ideal ethic that a Christian worldview advocates is not that slavery is permissible as long as one does not beat one's slaves too severely. Rather, this is one improvement on the way to the ultimate moral ideal. This is where the notion of an ethic with multiple levels is relevant. The culture of the

Ancient Near East only limited the physical beatings of slaves by the pragmatic notion that doing so was not prudent, because the owner was damaging his property. However, some particular slaves were treated in a horrific manner as a “lesson” to the other slaves. The aforementioned limitations on the severity of beatings of slaves in the Old Testament show a redemptive movement, but that movement is *incomplete*. We see a further redemptive movement in the New Testament letter of Paul to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus, in which the apostle pleads that Philemon would relate to Onesimus not as a slave, but a brother. For the redemptive movement of Scripture to be fulfilled, then, slavery must be abolished. The ultimate ethic that Scripture moves towards is one in which slavery is eliminated entirely and the basic human dignity of all is given proper weight.

The Old Testament does—but does not always—present a universal ideal ethic for all cultures. However, it does reveal moral improvements in relation to the predominant culture of its writers. Rather than attempting to justify all aspects of the Old Testament moral code, “we can affirm that God begins with an ancient people who have imbibed dehumanizing customs and social structures from their ANE [Ancient Near East] context. Yet this God desires to draw them in and show them a better way” (Copan 2008: 16). As Copan points out, a complete overhaul of the moral system of the Ancient Near East would be difficult for the people to grasp, and the resistance could be overwhelming. To underscore this point, consider the difficulty of establishing a pluralistic democracy in a nation where tribal or religious structures make such a change very difficult, even if it is desirable. In the Ancient Near East, the radical social change entailed by the outright elimination of slavery might fail, but the goal of the incremental steps present in Scripture show that the ultimate aim is the elevation of the status of slaves and the ultimate elimination of the practice. The movement in the spirit of the words of the Bible is in a humanizing and redemptive direction, albeit in partial or incremental steps.

In sum, epistemic supernaturalism includes a variety of sources of moral knowledge. This will often include special revelation via a sacred text. When a text such as the Bible is used as a source for moral inquiry, however, it is crucial to understand the historical context as well as the redemptive movement of the Scriptures as a whole. Those who depend on a sacred text in their quest for moral knowledge should avoid a naive, atomistic, and historically insensitive interpretive approach.

Epistemic naturalism is the view that for some moral claim to be an instance of moral knowledge, it must be validly inferred from non-moral propositions about human nature and the world. On epistemic naturalism, our moral knowledge is empirical knowledge. For example, a naturalistic theory, in Simon’s sense of the term, might hold “that moral truths are objective and genuinely normative but we have access to them through induction from natural facts. The most likely candidates for such facts are ones concerning what contributes to the realization of human capacities (or hinders them) and what tends toward human satisfaction (or dissatisfaction)” (Simon 1998: 115–16). On this type of theory, something is good when it has the effect of contributing to the realization of human capacities, and objectively bad when it undermines them. Heroin is objectively bad, whereas orange juice is objectively good. Epistemic naturalists might go on to claim that desire and pleasure are indicators of the good. Pleasure confirms our judgments of goodness (and pain disconfirms them). Virtues, then, would be traits conducive to the realization of capacities, while vices would be traits which undermine their realization.

This version of naturalism about moral knowledge and morality more generally is consistent with Christianity; given the view that we were created by God, who wants what is best for us, gave us the capacities required for us to live well, and used pleasure and desire to direct us. However, one philosophical objection to this line of thought is that there are human capacities which should not be realized. A person might be excellent at and even take pleasure in manipulation, torture, and lying, but surely these capacities should not be realized. Moreover, we have natural capacities that are morally insignificant, such as learning to clap our hands.

Rational intuitionism is the view that for some moral claim to be an instance of moral knowledge, it must be validly inferred from premises which contain moral truths. Basic moral knowledge, from which other moral knowledge is derived, is self-evident. That is, if one truly understands a claim that is thought to be basic, then one should see that it is true. In this way, basic moral knowledge is similar to basic mathematical knowledge. Some mathematical truths cannot be argued for, they can only be “seen” to be true. The same can be said for basic moral truths.

One way to understand a rational intuition is to take it to be a direct insight into the necessary character of moral reality (Austin 2003). Necessary truths are true in all possible worlds. That is, it is impossible for them to be false. Examples of such truths include “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ” and “Nothing can be red all over and green all over at the same time.” Candidates for necessary moral truths include “It is wrong to torture babies for fun” and “It is morally impermissible to inflict gross harm for trivial purposes” (Simon 1998: 141). For proponents of intuitionism, we should expect our access to moral truth to be irreducibly moral because of the irreducibility of at least some moral truths.

Some object to rational intuitionism on the grounds that a person could claim any truth to be self-evident which would then justify moral belief systems based on such claims, even erroneous or egregiously immoral ones. In response, intuitionists have pointed out that the answer to this is not the abandonment of intuitionism, but the admission of fallibility and openness to being corrected by others or one’s own critical thought. While it is true that we might take the moral beliefs of our own culture to be self-evident truths in an uncritical manner, this is a reason for more careful thought and application of the notion of self-evidence in ethics, rather than for abandoning it altogether, according to the intuitionist.

This type of rational intuitionism is also compatible with Christian thought, given biblical claims about the moral law being written on our hearts and the need for correction given the deceitfulness of those hearts (see Romans 2:14–15 and Jeremiah 17:9). Moreover, on some understandings of the God of theism, God is a necessary being who necessarily exhibits particular properties, including moral properties. It makes sense that moral truths would be necessary truths on such an understanding of God.

In order to see how these theories of moral knowledge operate, consider a possible example of moral knowledge:

H = Humility is a virtue.

How might a person come to know H on the three theories of moral inquiry just described?

On epistemic supernaturalism, there is a very straightforward way in which one could come to learn H. By reading a canonical text which includes a command to be humble or describes an example of humility as something that should be emulated, a theist

could come to believe H. A follower of Judaism could come to believe H through a reading of the life of Moses in the book of Genesis, as well as the tradition of the writings of Jewish moralists commenting on this virtue as it is revealed in the Hebrew Bible (Jacobs 1999). A Muslim could come to believe H on the basis of Hadith (i.e. the collected sayings of Muhammad and his companions). Hadith 1589, for example, states that “[Allah] has revealed to me that you should adopt humility so that no one oppresses another.” Finally, a Christian might read Paul’s letter to the Philippians, and through gaining an understanding of the example of Christ’s humility as well as Paul’s exhortation to be humble, come to believe H. There are other possibilities on supernaturalism apart from the reading and adoption of a particular Scripture concerning humility. One might have a mystical religious experience which causes her to believe H, for example.

On epistemic naturalism, there are also many possibilities for coming to know H. As one contemporary philosopher puts it:

Humility can be defined as the disposition to allow the awareness of and concern about your limitations to have a realistic influence on your attitudes and behavior. At the heart of this realism is a perspective gained through accurate appraisal of your limitations and their implications for your circumstances, attitudes, and behavior.

(Snow 2005: 82)

On this conception of humility, a person realizes that he should be humble by understanding his status as a finite and limited human being (Snow 2005). Coming to know H can have a more individualistic flavor, however, as one might see that H is true after becoming aware of the fact that he has some particular deficiency in his character, and on this basis realize that humility is an appropriate attitude to possess. He could have some personal experience that underscores some particular weakness, and on that basis be brought down to earth, have his pride undermined, and believe H. This might even lead him to a more general form of humility, in which he comes to appreciate both his own limitations as well as the limitations of all of humanity in the face of the greatness of nature, perhaps occasioned by taking in the sight of a vast mountain range or the sea at sunset.

A different and more general consideration of the human condition could also lead someone to believe H (Wielenberg 2005). On a theistic analysis, the humble person neither underestimates nor overestimates her own value or abilities but, rather, recognizes that these are gifts from God, and acknowledges her dependence on God. Much of what contributes to her success is not within her control, but God’s. Hence, the humble theist is grateful for her success in light of this dependence, and gives credit to God. On atheism, however, there is also room for the acknowledgment of dependence on something outside of us, because so much of what contributes to our success—psychological constitution, physical health, family background, the time and place of our birth and upbringing, and economic factors—is outside of our control. On atheism, these factors are not under God’s control. They are under no one’s control. Given this, no one gets the credit. Sheer chance and good fortune should receive the majority of the credit. “It is the dependence of human beings and their actions on factors beyond their control—dependence that is present whether God exists or not—that makes humility in some form an appropriate attitude to have” (Wielenberg 2005: 112). So, in either kind of universe, atheistic or theistic, it is foolish to take the balance of credit for one’s

accomplishments. Like the theist, the atheist can come to learn of, and then acknowledge her dependence on, something outside of herself, substituting good fortune for God. This is one way a person could naturalistically come to know H.

Other non-theistic advocates of humility might see the moral standards which they hold to be true as a replacement for God and come to know H in the following manner. One feature of human life that makes humility appropriate, even for the moral exemplar, is a full appreciation of one's moral standards. The moral exemplar might be tempted to see herself as superior to others when she is aware of her superior moral character. However, such a person will recognize how much more her standards require of her, and this will foster humility (Kupfer 2003). Additionally, the moral exemplar can avoid the temptation of being overly impressed with herself by the realization that much of what contributes to her morally praiseworthy character is not ultimately to her credit but, rather, is dependent upon persons and forces external to her.

To sum up this discussion of naturalistic ways in which one might come to know H, it is important to note that all of the above means of coming to know H are also available to the theist, who can make use of natural sources for moral knowledge as well as supernatural ones. Of course, if theism is false, then supernatural sources are not genuine sources of moral knowledge.

Could a person come to know H on a rational intuitionist conception of moral knowledge? If H is a plausible candidate for a necessary moral truth, then the answer is clearly yes. But is H a necessary truth? Here, I can only report that it seems to me that H is a necessary truth, if we properly understand human nature, virtue, and what humility is (that is, if we do not equate it to being overly self-effacing or weak-willed). However, we can set aside a dispute over the necessity of H, and consider another way in which we could come to know H that is consistent with intuitionism. One plausible candidate for a necessary moral truth is this: Persons deserve respect. This seems like a self-evident necessary truth. It is arguably foundational to any sound moral system and way of life. Given this necessary truth, one could reason that humility is an appropriate attitude to take in relation to other persons, given their inherent dignity and worth as persons. In this way, one could come to know H by inference from a necessary moral truth, or rational intuition, regardless of one's religious beliefs, or lack thereof.

Theism, Philosophical Naturalism, and Moral Inquiry

In this section, I will compare theism and philosophical naturalism with respect to their ability to provide a foundation for moral inquiry. Philosophical naturalism is different from the epistemic naturalism discussed in the foregoing section. *Philosophical* naturalism is a wide-ranging thesis about all of reality. There are many different ways of understanding it and versions of the view that have been proposed, but philosophical naturalism can be generally characterized as including several different elements, to which we will now turn (Moreland 2009).

First, philosophical naturalism includes a particular set of epistemic attitudes. That is, it includes claims about the nature of knowledge. Philosophical naturalists tend to embrace either weak or strong scientism. Weak scientism is the view that scientific knowledge claims are the most credible knowledge claims. While nonscientific fields do yield interesting and helpful data, these fields are thought to be epistemically inferior to the hard sciences. Strong scientism is the view that only science yields epistemically credible data. Philosophical naturalists are generally skeptical towards knowledge

claims that are not justified by a methodology employed in the hard sciences. They also tend to be skeptical of first-person knowledge claims as well as the deliverances of first philosophy. Second, and more briefly, philosophical naturalism includes a causal account of how it is that all entities came to be, with a central place for both the atomic theory of matter and evolutionary biology. Given this, everything that exists and everything that happens can, in principle, be explained using the methods of the natural sciences. Finally, a naturalistic ontology only has room for entities that are amenable to explanation by some future ideal form of physics. This leaves no room for irreducible teleology in the world, or for libertarian human agency.

A philosophical naturalist would, of course, eschew any form of divine revelation as a source of moral knowledge, given that such a view has no room for supernatural entities. A proponent of such a view could adopt epistemic naturalism as a means for moral inquiry, and perhaps embrace an ethic emphasizing the development of human capacities as was previously discussed. But could a philosophical naturalist consistently adopt rational intuitionism as a method of moral inquiry?

Some philosophical naturalists maintain that there are irreducible ethical facts that are not scientific facts (Wielenberg 2005). For them, some ethical truths are necessary truths, just like the mathematical truth that $2 + 2 = 4$ is a necessary truth. For example, the claim that suffering is intrinsically evil is thought by Wielenberg to be a necessary ethical truth, true in every possible universe. Not all ethical truths are necessary truths, but contingent ethical truths are at least partially grounded in some necessary ethical truth. A philosophical naturalist who includes necessary ethical truths in his ontology, as Wielenberg does, can then make use of rational intuitions in moral inquiry.

But how is the existence of necessary ethical truths explained on philosophical naturalism? According to Wielenberg, the answer is that such truths “are part of the furniture of the universe” (Wielenberg 2005: 52). These truths are just there, and that’s all there is to say about it. However, some have countered that the philosophical naturalist who also holds that there are necessary moral truths is trying to have her cake and eat it too.

It has been argued that several features of the moral order are recalcitrant entities for the philosophical naturalist (Moreland 2009). For example, the value of human persons as such, as well as the fact that when we follow the moral law this is conducive to our flourishing as human beings, are both very difficult to account for on naturalism. The theist, however, has a ready answer for these facts. Humans have value and can flourish when they live morally because they are made in the image of a moral being who designed them to flourish when they follow the moral law. Consider also that the existence of objective moral value does not seem to fit very well within a naturalistic framework. As Moreland puts the problem facing the naturalist: if we begin with the Big Bang and understand that “the history of the universe is the arrangement of microphysical entities into larger and larger structural compounds, from whence cometh value” (Moreland 2009: 146)? The existence of non-natural moral properties is difficult for the naturalist to explain. Many have opted to reject the existence of such properties in favor of a view that is better suited to naturalism. Theists can explain the existence of objective value because the ground of all being is a personal, morally good being.

Does theism have an explanatory advantage with respect to the existence of necessary ethical truths? The best answer that a philosophical naturalist can give is that these truths are just there, and that’s all. But on this point, theism offers a deeper explanation. There are necessary moral truths because these are part of the necessary moral character

of God. But even if we grant that such necessary moral truths can exist on naturalism, problems remain. On naturalism, our existence is highly contingent. That is, if we were able to rewind the clock and let the forces of evolution begin again, it is highly improbable that *Homo sapiens* would come into existence. Given this, it is “a fortuitous chain of events that resulted in the actual existence of the kinds of creatures to whom eternally and necessarily true, but causally impotent, principles apply!” (Linville 2009: 414). Not only is it extremely unlikely that, by chance, a universe would emerge containing beings to which moral truths apply, but a universe with such truths is highly probable if theism is true and much less so if it is false (Ganssle 2000). This is because in a naturalistic universe, it would be an oddity that these necessary moral truths, prior to our existence, applied to nothing. Then, by accident, creatures emerge which not only match these moral truths, but who, by fulfilling the obligations these truths entail, tend to flourish. This is a strange picture of moral reality, on naturalism.

What is the relevance of all of this for theism and moral inquiry? If it is the case that objective morality in general, and necessary moral truths in particular, are simply taken as brute facts on naturalism, then the philosophical naturalist who makes use of rational intuitions in her moral inquiry faces a problem. This is because the existence of such moral properties and truths have a ready theistic explanation, while not only is no naturalistic explanation forthcoming, but given the materialist ontology of naturalism it is difficult to see how the existence of non-natural moral truths could ever be explained in a naturalistic manner, let alone their connections to human nature and human flourishing.

Conclusion

Theistic forms of moral inquiry can overlap with many forms of naturalistic moral inquiry. People in both camps can acquire moral knowledge by examining the natural world, human psychology (and human nature more generally), the nature of human relationships and societies, and by testing the logical coherence and considering the practical impact of potential instances of moral knowledge. But a theist in search of moral knowledge can and should go beyond these forms of inquiry, both because she has a richer conception of human nature and additional sources of moral knowledge.

If theism is true, then the epistemic and philosophical naturalist is at a disadvantage, insofar as there are relevant facts which she ought to take into account but does not because of her metaphysical views. The theist can agree with Aquinas and Aristotle that we can have ethics without theism, but such an ethics will be truncated.

Ethics will be adequate to the degree that it is based on true knowledge of what we are. An ethics which failed to take into account the fact that we are caused, our existence a gift, that we are freely enacting a story not of our own writing, that awe and wonder and worship are due our cause, would not be true to the facts of human existence. Such increased theoretical knowledge is not a theory about ethical knowledge so much as a component of it.

(McInerny 1998: 46)

On the other hand, if theism is false, and such an understanding of humanity is mistaken, then it can hinder our quest for moral knowledge.

Ultimately, while moral inquiry might be valuable for its own sake, on a theistic understanding of reality it has a purpose. That purpose, ultimately, is to help us both

receive and enjoy a deep, lasting, loving communion with God and other people. If this is correct, then moral inquiry is one of the most important activities that human beings can undertake.

Related Topics

Chapter 14: Naturalism; Chapter 19: Philosophical Methodology; Chapter 23: Psychology; Chapter 30: Arguments About Human Persons; Chapter 32: Human Rights; Chapter 39: Bioethics; Chapter 47: Narrative; Chapter 51: Happiness; Chapter 54: The Meaning of Life

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- Webb, W. (2001) *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Wielenberg, E. (2005) *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Recommended Reading

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- Adams, R. (1999) *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Adams offers a comprehensive account of an ethical framework based on an infinite God who serves as the transcendent standard of morality informing the many finite goods of our daily lives, such as friendship and vocation.

MORAL INQUIRY

- Austin, M. and D. Geivett (eds), (2012) *Being Good: Christian Virtues for Everyday Life*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. The contributors to this book each explore a particular virtue, such as faith, hope, compassion, and forgiveness, and then examine its implications for issues in daily life including work, family, and moral development.
- Beatty, M., C. Fisher, and M. Nelson (eds), (1998) *Christian Theism and Moral Philosophy*, Macon, GA: Mercer University Press. This edited collection includes twelve chapters exploring the implications of Christian theism for certain fundamental issues in moral philosophy: the metaphysics of morals, the epistemology of ethics, and the ethics of love.
- Garcia, R. and N. King (eds), (2009) *Is Goodness without God Good Enough?* Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield. This edited collection explores many of the basic issues concerning the potential connections between God and morality, and serves as a nice counterpoint to Wielenberg's book.
- Mattison, W. (2008) *Introducing Moral Theology: True Happiness and the Virtues*, Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press. Drawing heavily on Thomas Aquinas, Mattison examines the cardinal and theological virtues and explores their relevance to issues in personal ethics (e.g. alcohol) and social ethics (e.g. warfare).
- Moreland, J. and S. Rae (2000) *Body and Soul*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. Two Christian philosophers engage in moral inquiry and argumentation, first constructing a metaphysical account of human persons and then applying it to a variety of issues in bioethics.
- Wielenberg, E. (2005) *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*, New York: Cambridge University Press. Wielenberg explores the ethical implications that would follow from the assumption that naturalism is true, including naturalistic accounts of humility, charity, and hope.

COGNITIVE SCIENCE

Mark C. Baker

Cognitive science is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of the mind that originated in the mid-1950s and draws on insights and techniques from psychology, linguistics, philosophy, computer science, and related disciplines. It can be defined more specifically as the study of the representations that are used by the mind, and the computational processes that operate over those representations. For example, Lepore and Pylyshyn (1999: vii) write: “The approach in cognitive science is . . . essentially computational; the capacity for intelligence is viewed in this discipline as arising from the processing of representations” (see also Wilson and Keil 1999: xxviii; Fodor 2000: 4). In essence, it is dedicated to pursuing the view that the mind is (at least in part) a kind of computer.

Defined in this way, there is no intrinsic logical connection between cognitive science and theism, the idea that there exists an all-powerful divine being that created the universe and is involved in how it unfolds. Most or all of what cognitive scientists have discovered could in principle be true (or false) regardless of whether theism is true or false. Nor is there any prominent subdiscipline defined by the intersection of these two disciplines—no distinct field of “Theistic cognitive science.”

That being said, there are some important interactions between the two, both at the foundations of cognitive science and at its edges. Part of the interest in cognitive science for some researchers is that it provides a way of “naturalizing” our understanding of the mind. It gives a potential way of explaining what it is for something to be rational or intelligent without attributing to it any kind of immaterial soul. Then if it turns out to be unnecessary to posit souls for rational creatures such as human beings in order to account for their rationality, it might also become unnecessary to posit a God who creates and sustains these souls. Thus one kind of consideration that has sometimes been used to support theism could be undermined by the successful pursuit of cognitive science.

However, the relationship between cognitive science and theism is arguably more complex and multidimensional than this. For example, one consequence of Cognitive Scientific thinking in the minds of its founders was a revival of interest in Cartesian rationalism—the idea that minds have innate structure and content. Now, for Descartes himself, there was a conceptual link between rationalism and dualism—and from there to his theism. One might wonder, then, whether it is possible to accept rationalism without some dualism and theism as well. Moreover, cognitive science seems to have hit some walls when it comes to providing a complete account of the human mind. The door thus remains open for some crucial role to be played by some kind of immaterial soul—and hence perhaps by an immaterial deity that gives and sustains that soul, and

from which the soul inherits its rationality. If so, cognitive science research actually makes this argument for theism stronger, although within a narrower domain.

The remainder of this article explores these themes in more detail.

A Taste of Cognitive Scientific Thinking

Let us begin by taking a closer look at what cognitive science is. When we define it as “the study of the representations that are used by the mind, and the computational processes that operate over those representations,” what does this amount to? What are these representations and why do we think that they play an important role in the human mind?

We can get a sense of this by way of some examples from the study of language that have been discussed by leading linguist Noam Chomsky, one of the founders of cognitive science. Consider what competent native speakers of English know about the following sentences (Chomsky 1982: 30):

- (1) The men are too stubborn to talk to Bill.
- (2) The men are too stubborn to talk to.

There is more to these normal-sounding English sentences than first meets the eye. Superficially, the only difference between them is that (1) ends with *Bill* and (2) does not. But there is also a significant difference in interpretation concerning who does the talking, the men or someone else. In sentence (1), it is clearly the men who do the talking; it can be roughly paraphrased as (3), where the subject of *talk to* is a pronoun that refers back to the men.

- (3) The men are so stubborn that they (the men) will not talk to Bill.

Since (2) is superficially identical to (1) up to the last word, one might expect that, by analogy, its interpretation should also be identical to that of (1) up to the last word. In other words, (2) should mean something like (4):

- (4) The men are so stubborn that they (the men) will not talk to.

But (2) cannot mean this. First, we want to know what is the object of the talking action: who is being addressed? Without this, the sentence is logically incomplete, like the deviant sentence *The men talked to*. So (4) needs to be completed with an indication of the one(s) being talked to. There are two main possibilities: it could be the men under discussion, or it could be someone else. We could thus complete the interpretation of (2) as either (5) or (6).

- (5) The men are so stubborn that they (the men) will not talk to someone else.
- (6) The men are so stubborn that they (the men) will not talk to them (the men).

But neither of these is a good paraphrase of (2) either. There is something correct about (6): (2) is about hypothetical situations in which the relevant men are being talked to.

But in this case it is not the men who are doing the talking; rather the situation envisioned is one in which other people are talking to the men. What (2) really means is something like (7).

- (7) The men are so stubborn that people in general will not talk to them (the men).

What we learn here is that the way that the subject of *to talk to* is interpreted in these sentences depends on whether there is an object like *Bill* in the sentence or not. It seems unlikely that this can be explained simply by superficial analogy (following a slogan like “interpret similar sentences similarly”) or by mere pragmatics (following a slogan like “interpret a sentence in the most plausible/useful way”). Rather, Chomsky concludes that sentences like (1) and (2) have representations in the minds of English speakers in which some kind of unpronounced pronouns are filled in as the subjects and objects of “to talk to,” and these pronouns are marked as to what they can and cannot refer to. In other words, (1) is mentally represented as (8), and (2) as (9).

- (8) The men₁ are too stubborn *pronoun*₁ to talk to Bill₂.
 (9) The men₁ are too stubborn *pronoun*₃ to talk to *pronoun*₁.

This example gives a taste of what cognitive scientists mean by mental representations, and what kind of explanatory work they might do. Speakers know unambiguously what they mean by a sentence, and hearers are often able to deduce what speakers mean. But (1) and (2) are not entirely explicit as to what the sentences mean. Hence speakers and hearers must have another representation of these sentences in their minds, one that does make explicit and unambiguous what the sentences mean, including who the talker is and who is being talked to. Therefore, there exist mental representations that are systematically related to things in the physical world (in this case, tokens of English sentences) but not identical to them.

In fact, speakers and hearers must control at least *two* distinct representations of these sentences: one that expresses what the sentences mean—something like (8) and (9)—and one that expresses how the sentences are pronounced—something more like the original (1) and (2). These two representations are somewhat different, because the extra pronoun-like elements are present in the meaning but not in the pronunciation. Cognitive scientists draw two conclusions from this. First, they infer that the mind contains *many* different kinds of representations, with different ones used for different purposes. Representations are thus a big deal when it comes to understanding the mind. Second, they infer that there must be processes of computation that take one kind of representation, suitable for one sort of purpose, and turn it into another kind of representation, suitable for another purpose. For example, part of speaking English is taking a representation like (8) and transforming it into a representation like (1) by systematically applying “rules” like the following:

“Delete a pronoun when it is the subject of an infinitival verb if it is understood as referring to the subject of the larger sentence.”

Conversely, hearers take a representation of what they hear like (1) and enrich it by adding in pronouns in the right places. More generally, if there are different kinds of

representations in the mind, then it also stands to reason that there are computations defined over these representations, including computations that transform one into another. This then illustrates more fully the definition of cognitive science.

The connection with computer science now becomes evident. The various representations of what an English sentence means and how it should be said are just the kinds of “data structures” that a good programmer would build into a computer system that was designed to do natural language applications. Indeed, computer scientists have gained much experience and sophistication in understanding different ways of representing data, what each is good for, and how to transform one type into another efficiently. It has also become clear that any sort of robot or computer system that is designed to interact with the world effectively will have in its databanks some kinds of representations of the state of the world, and will be able to compute how those states are likely to change depending on what the robot does. So computer scientists have practical experience with the kinds of representational and computational issues that arise as psychologists and linguists seek to understand what people and other animals do mentally, making dialog across these disciplines fruitful.

While I have illustrated using examples from the study of language, similar reasons to believe in representations and computations are found in many other areas. Another relatively well-developed area of cognitive science is the study of vision. Here, too, representation and computation must be essential, as shown for example by groundbreaking work by David Marr (1982) and others. We know what kind of visual input we receive—two two-dimensional patterns of light striking our retinas—and we know what we perceive—a single three-dimensional world of objects arrayed in space. Since these are quite different, there must be (at least) two distinct representations in use, with the three-dimensional world calculated from the two-dimensional patterns of color in systematic ways. Indeed, we can figure out quite a bit about the details of our mental representations of visual space by a variety of techniques, such as showing people carefully constructed artificial stimuli and seeing which ones trick them into perceiving a particular object in a particular way. Other areas of cognition that have been open to investigation in these terms include: people’s mental representations of number and quantity, of spatial relations and mental maps, of human faces, of kinship relations and other social networks, and of the belief states of other people around them—among others (see Pinker 1997 and Wilson and Keil 1999 for overviews). In addition, a large sub-branch of the field has studied similar topics in infants and children, to see how the representations and computations of the mind change as the person grows and learns. This then is the domain of cognitive science.

The Computational Theory of Mind and Naturalizing Intelligence

Cognitive science has been successful, then, across a fairly broad range of topics by pursuing its twin notions of representation and computation, which seem to be ubiquitous in the mind when studied in this way. It therefore becomes natural and tempting to conjecture that this will add up to a complete theory of the mind. One might imagine, then, that all the mind is is a large repository of mental representations of different kinds, together with ways of computing one from another. This conjecture is known as the computational theory of the mind: the idea that the mind can be fully understood as a complex computational device (Fodor 1975, 1981; Dennett 1981: chapter 7; Dennett 1991; see Pinker 2002: 31–41 for an informal overview).

In proposing the computational theory of mind, cognitive scientists certainly do not mean that the human mind works the same way that a digital computer does at the physical level. That would clearly be false: the computations of the mind presumably run on cells called neurons bathed in a chemical soup, whereas those of the computers we know run on tiny *nor*-gates engraved on silicon chips. But part of the core idea of cognitive science is that these significant physical differences might not matter as much as you would think. Alan Turing (1937) formulated a precise mathematical definition of what computation is, and it is completely independent of the physical details of the “machine” that performs the computation. For example, we can imagine many different adding machines that will receive the inputs 7 and 5 and produce the output 12. Any such machine is performing the same computation, although its method of doing so could be quite different. Given this, it is better to express the computational theory of mind not as “the mind is a computer” (invoking the images we have of computers as physical objects) but rather as “the mind is a computational device”—meaning that it performs computations in the mathematical sense defined by Turing.

This brings us to the first serious point of contact between cognitive science and theism and associated religious notions. To the extent that the mind can be understood as something that performs computations of a specific sort, operating over a finite set of well-defined symbols, to that extent the mind is demystified and rendered understandable.

This would be a huge step, because apart from cognitive science our experience of having a rational mind is remarkably mysterious (cf. Pinker 1997: 4, 560; Pinker 2002: 31). We all think, and we realize that this can be a conscious activity that requires effort. But what exactly we are doing when we are thinking is almost completely opaque to us. I stare for a while at a chess position or a linguistics problem or my financial statements, and suddenly I get an idea of what to do. I might test that idea and either accept it or reject it; if I reject it, I might try to get another idea. But many of my best, most rational ideas seem to pop into my head from nowhere, and I do not know what steps I went through to get them. Sometimes in more complex tasks I have a sense of going through a process, with conscious steps, but even that is mysterious, because each individual step feels like a discontinuous leap from one idea to the next. And combined with our lack of awareness of what is actually involved in thinking is the fact that most things in the world do not think in this sense: rocks do not, trees do not, worms probably do not, and even dogs do so only in a sense that seems very limited compared to ours. Putting this together, rational thought seems to be something quite miraculous, which goes beyond the bounds of the familiar physical world. The temptation is thus quite strong to see it as something spiritual, as a divine spark in us—perhaps as something given to us by God, when we were made in his image. So it has been very plausible throughout history to see our power of conscious, rational, voluntary thought in theistic terms.

What cognitive science seems to offer, then, is a credible alternative to this theistic view of the mind. It reveals that we have certain representations in our minds, and that we perform systematic calculations using those representations. And so do computers. We know in great detail how to endow machines with similar representations, and how to build them so that they perform similar calculations in a systematic way. Indeed, we can program them so that they do well various things that we have traditionally taken to be signs of distinctively human intelligence, at least over limited domains: they can play chess well, prove mathematical theorems, diagnose diseases, and pick investment strategies. Nevertheless, there is nothing mysterious or divine about computers or what

they are doing when they do these things. On the contrary, we know that they are purely material objects, “mindlessly” obeying the laws of physics, because we built them that way. Thinking along these lines, it becomes quite imaginable that humans could be purely material objects too, and still be (or appear to be) rational and intelligent. As a result, Pinker declares that “new ideas from four frontiers of knowledge—the sciences of mind, brain, genes, and evolution” are “exorcising the ghost [soul] in the machine [body]” (Pinker 2002: 31).

Cognitive science even gives a plausible way of thinking about why thinking seems mysterious to us when we are doing it. After all, the behavior of computers also seems mysterious to the casual observer looking at them from the outside. I punch a number into a calculator and press the square root sign. Instantly a long string of numbers appears, mysteriously, apparently out of nowhere. In fact, the machine went quickly through many perfectly simple and un-mysterious intermediate calculations along the way; I just didn’t see them. The machine only reported to me its final answer, not all the steps it went through to arrive at it. There is every reason to think that the same is true of the human mind. We are evidently always doing all sorts of normal and simple computations of which we are not consciously aware. For example, in the English examples discussed above, we unconsciously delete pronouns in certain places from sentences we are thinking of uttering when they refer to other phrases in that sentence. The computation is simple enough to specify, and we can infer that we must be doing it, given how what we mean matches up with what we say. But we have no awareness of performing the computation. Just like the calculator, my mind only reports to me (the conscious part of my mind) certain key steps, such as the final answer, not every intermediate step. (And a good thing too, since tracking all the intermediate stages in the calculation would surely be very tedious.) Hence the mind, like the calculator, *looks* mysterious, but only until one figures out how to get inside it, according to the cognitive scientist.

In the final analysis, we can describe this in two ways: we can say that well-programmed computers really *are* intelligent, or that they only give the illusion of being intelligent because when we look at the details we see that they are not using anything worth calling *intelligence* after all. But whichever choice we make, it is not implausible to say the same thing about us: either our intelligence is a purely physical phenomenon, or we only have the illusion of intelligence ourselves—an illusion that will dissipate once we know in more detail exactly what we are doing. It then becomes clearer than ever before that there might be no need to attribute an immaterial soul to human beings. And if not, then there is no analogy to be drawn from the spirit of a person that controls his or her body to a great Spirit that controls the universe. Nor is there need to posit a nonmaterial being that creates and sustains such souls in us. Cognitive science thus gives us that much less reason to be theists.

The Neutrality of Cognitive Science

However, there are also other, less obvious connections between cognitive science and theism that can be explored. Some of these are not antagonistic at all, but rather neutral, or even positive and synergistic.

First, as mentioned above, the conceptual power of Turing’s definition of computation, which lies at the heart of the computational theory of mind, is that it is entirely neutral about the nature of the “machine” that performs the computations. As a result, the success of the computational theory of mind might open up the serious possibility

that the mind is a purely physical machine, consisting only of physical particles obeying familiar laws of physics, but it in no way entails that the mind must be physical. Most of the successes of cognitive science to date have been at the level of figuring out what *functions* a human being (or animal) must be computing, and perhaps what *algorithms* (general computing strategies) they are using to compute those functions. They do not reach down anywhere close to what computer scientists would call the “machine code,” the grittiest level of programming, where decisions are made about exactly how a high-level computational function will be implemented using the specific hardware available in this particular machine.

The whole point of looking at a topic in terms of functions, algorithms, and computations is to be able to say something substantive while abstracting away from these details. Since it is at that level that most of cognitive science operates, cognitive science is, by definition, neutral as to whether the “machine” that performs the calculations is made up of neurons, or nor-gates, or ectoplasm, or fairy dust, or some combination—or indeed out of nothing at all. Any conclusions about which of these hypotheses is true or the most likely do not come, strictly speaking, from cognitive science, but from cognitive science combined with other physical or metaphysical assumptions—such as a judgment about which hypothesis is simpler overall (Ockham’s Razor), or a background bias in favor of materialism. And of course all these considerations were already in play before the advent of cognitive science. Cognitive science itself is officially neutral about these matters.

Of course, this might change in the foreseeable future. The brain sciences are an area of intense current research. Those who study brains are trying to work their way upward toward the mind, while cognitive scientists who study the mind are trying to work their way down to the brain, both trying to crack the “machine code” in which our hardware computes identifiable functions and algorithms. In recognition of these efforts, we have, since about 1980, added the name of a new field, cognitive neuroscience, which aspires to bridge the gap between strict brain science and traditional higher-level cognitive science (Albright and Neville 1999).

So far it is debatable whether this emerging field has realized its aspirations, and the problems that have come to light seem more striking than the solutions. I believe that so far it is not known how a single piece of abstract propositional knowledge known by a human being is actually represented in the physical structures of the brain. Indeed, it is not even known how abstract knowledge is represented in the much simpler brain of the ant, as discussed forcefully by C. R. Gallistel (Gallistel and King 2009). It can be shown beyond reasonable doubt that an ant foraging for food, even though it wanders in a complicated path, always keeps track of the exact distance and direction back to its hive. As a result, whenever its mission is completed it can immediately and accurately go straight home by the shortest path. If an experimenter picks the ant up and moves it to a new spot, it still heads straight to where its home ought to be (not thrown off by the change of terrain), and it acts confused when it arrives there to find no hive. This behavior shows that the mind of the ant stores two numerical values, which it continually updates: the distance to home, and the compass bearing to home. However, existing theories of neural structure cannot account for this. These theories are built around “realistic” idealizations of what we see happening in brains, and that is complex patterns of electrical activity, which are continuous in nature and always in flux. Gallistel and King show that theories that try to be realistic to the brain science in this way are exactly the wrong sorts of theories for representing numerical values—such as the distance to home. They conclude that

[i]f the computational theory of mind, the core assumption of cognitive science, is correct, then brains must possess a mechanism for carrying information forward in time in a computationally accessible format. . . . [But] as of this writing, neuroscience knows of no plausible mechanism for [doing this].

(Gallistel and King 2009: 287)

Until problems like this have been solved, the theoretical neutrality of cognitive science to questions of how computations are performed in bodies and/or souls remains a serious matter.

Cognitive Science, Innateness, and Theism

Another possible point of connection between cognitive science and theism comes from the association between cognitive science and rationalism (e.g., see Chomsky 1965: chapter 1; Chomsky 1966). Here is how the matter arises.

Cognitive scientific research shows that people's minds include many sophisticated representations of language, meaning, space, and relationships, and that they perform complex computations with those representations, most of which we are unaware of. The question then arises, how did we acquire all this? How did we learn what representations to use, and what computations to go through to arrive at them? It is all well and good to say that the mind works like a computer, but what plays the role of the programmer in the analogy? Who set up for us our representational systems and defined our computational algorithms? It is hard to imagine children figuring all this out for themselves from scratch, given how slow they are on the uptake in many other ways.

The bite of these questions might become clearer if we reflect a bit more on our mental representations of *The men are too stubborn to talk to*, as considered earlier. How do we come to know that the ones understood as talking in this example are not the same as the men whose stubbornness is under discussion, as in the superficially parallel *The men are too stubborn to talk*? In fact, English speakers do not have to learn this directly; it can be inferred from other, more general facts about the language, including the following:

- A. A clause must be logically complete.
- B. A null object can only be understood as the same as the higher subject.
- C. The pronoun subject of a clause cannot refer to something else in the same clause.

Each of these premises holds for English sentences that do not involve the word *stubborn*. For example, premise A explains why we cannot say *The men talked to*; there must be some kind of noun phrase after *talked to*. Given this, the English speakers know to include an unpronounced noun phrase ("NP") in their representation of the end of the sentence:

- (10) The men are too stubborn NP to talk to NP.

Premise B now implies that the object NP must refer to the subject of the sentence as a whole, further enriching the representation to give:

- (11) The men_k are too stubborn NP to talk to NP_k.

Like hypothesis A, hypothesis B is valid for other sentences, such as (12), which means approximately the same thing as *It is easy for me to talk to the men*.

- (12) The men_k are easy for me to talk to (NP_k).

Finally, we come to the question of how the first unpronounced noun phrase in (11) is interpreted. In the abstract there might be a preference for it to refer to the men, that being the only immediately available antecedent for the pronoun within the sentence. But premise C blocks that representation in this particular case. Premise C also explains simpler facts, such as the fact that the pronoun *she* in the following examples cannot refer to the same person as *Mary* or *her* (Lasnik 1989).

- (13) She talks to Mary/her. (Can't mean: She/Mary talks to herself.)

Premise C also implies that the complete representation of (11) cannot be *The men_k are too stubborn NP_k to talk to NP_k* , but must be *The men_k are too stubborn NP_n to talk to NP_k* with the talkers being someone other than the men.

This kind of reasoning takes us part of the way toward understanding how people arrive at the relatively complex representations and computations that they do—but only part of the way. The question arises now as to how English speakers learn that A–C are true for English. Certainly nobody taught my children A–C explicitly, and yet they know these quite specific and abstract principles, because they understand this range of sentences in the same way that I do.

Considerations like this lead Chomsky and other cognitive scientists to rationalist conclusions: they infer that principles like A–C are innate aspects of the human mind. People do not learn them per se, but they emerge spontaneously in the normally developing human mind. In other words, a relatively large amount of structure and information is preprogrammed into the mind, providing it with the computational infrastructure it needs to develop the relatively complex representations that it does in language, vision, and other areas of cognition. The traditional picture of a child's mind being a blank slate that experience writes on does not seem to get one very far if one wants to account in any detail for the mental representations and computations that children come to use. Gallistel and King (2009: 252) come to the same conclusion, considering quite different cognitive domains (navigation, foraging), remarking that there is an “ineluctable nativism inherent in any representational machinery.” Our everyday experience of personal computers also points in this direction, in that we know what computers with blank hard drives are good for: virtually nothing. It is computers that are preloaded with sophisticated operating systems and an interesting variety of applications that can receive meaningful data and do meaningful things with it (cf. Pinker 2002: 34–5). There is no reason to think that the human mind is different from a PC in this respect.

The radical-sounding idea that the human mind comes equipped with significant innate structure for dealing with natural language data, including principles like A and C, makes a bold prediction that seems to be true. This is that all human languages, despite their superficial differences, will follow these same principles. In fact, it has been shown that languages as widely different as English, Mohawk, Thai, Swahili, Turkish, Mapudungun, and many others respect these principles (when stated correctly), despite their very different histories, locations, and cultural contexts (Baker 1996). In

that respect, then, the rationalism that cognitive science depends on can be confirmed empirically.

But this line of analysis pushes the hard question one step back. We do not have to explain how children learn the right representations and computations from experience; we say that they do not learn them, but come with the relevant infrastructure already in place—not only the hardware, but also the firmware, operating system, and many of the “apps.” But now we want to understand where all this preprogrammed computational infrastructure came from.

To Descartes and his fellow seventeenth-century rationalists the answer would, perhaps, have been obvious. Descartes also believed in an immaterial soul, created by God. The innate structure that does not come from experience but is a precondition for our knowledge and experience could be part of that soul, which God makes in his image. This forms a coherent picture, with theism undergirding dualism, dualism undergirding rationalism, and rationalism undergirding workaday cognitive science. In short, one could say that God plays the role of software engineer that is arguably presupposed by the computational theory of the mind.

This seems to be as coherent an answer as any that we now have available. Two other research programs exist. One is to find ways of doing cognitive science that further reduce the preconditions for having a functioning mind, so that less innate structure is needed. That would involve deriving things like premises A–C from still more general principles, so less needs to be preprogrammed into the mind. That route might be attractive in theory, but it has been hard to do in detail. For example, there is nothing logically necessary about premise C such that it follows from the fundamental dynamics of communication. Artificial languages, for example, usually have no equivalent of C and get along fine without it.

The second alternative research program is that of Evolutionary Psychology, which has grown in influence within cognitive science in the last two decades. Evolutionary Psychology embraces innateness, but replaces God in the rationalist picture with evolution (Pinker 1997; Carruthers 1992). Evolutionary psychologists say that children do not have to learn the computational infrastructure for dealing with sentences like *The men are too stubborn to talk to* over their individual life-spans, but the human species developed it over evolutionary time, as we evolved. On this view, the innate structure of the human mind is part of our biological heritage, specified somehow by our DNA, which in turn has been shaped by natural selection.

This might be the best non-theistic game in town, but like cognitive neuroscience, the questions it faces look at least as impressive as its answers. Recall that we do not know how abstract propositional knowledge is represented in neurons. A fortiori, then, we do not know how it can be represented in the DNA that guides the construction of neurons. Also potentially puzzling is the discovery that the human genome contains relatively few genes. Hence we might wonder whether we have enough of them to specify (for example) premise C, along with the rest of our innate mental structure, in addition to our entire physical blueprint. For aspects of intelligence that are distinctively human, such as language, this issue is compounded by the fact that there is remarkably little genetic difference between a human being and a chimpanzee. Are there enough novel genes, then, and enough evolutionary time, to account for the impressive mental differences between a human mind and a chimpanzee mind in this way? Finally, we must ask how plausible it is that specific features of human cognition, such as premise C (or something that implies it), were actually favored by natural selection. Would organisms

that had C as part of their mental architecture have had an advantage in surviving and reproducing compared to similar creatures that did not? It is hard to see how. It is easy enough to say that language as a whole has proved useful as a means of communication in ways that enhance fitness, but it is challenging to apply this conceptual framework to the more specific features of human language. One can suppose that C plays a role in making sentences less ambiguous, and that aids communication. But it also makes language less flexible, and that could be a hindrance to communication. Moreover, human languages tolerate massive amounts of ambiguity in other respects, so if there is evolutionary pressure against ambiguity, why hasn't it been reduced more than it has? Given unanswered questions like this, it is an open question whether the rationalism that a fully developed cognitive science of the human mind seems to depend on can, in fact, be fully naturalized within an atheistic evolutionary view.

Theism and the Incompleteness of Cognitive Science

A final consideration is whether the computational theory of mind really will amount to a complete theory of the mind. Only if it does can cognitive science claim to have shown that there is no need to invoke influences outside of normal physical forces in the area of the mental. If, on the contrary, cognitive science ends up providing explanations for some aspects of the human mind but not others, it might actually enhance the argument that something of potential religious significance is going on in those aspects of the mind that it does not properly apply to, since a plausible alternative will have been eliminated.

In fact, cognitive science cannot claim to have finished the job. Generally speaking, it works best for relatively narrow input–output functions, where the mind interfaces with the rest of the world, such as perception, language, and motor planning. For matters arguably at the center of the mind, such as rational thought and strategic planning, its successes are much more limited. Moreover, insider appraisals of how likely it is to reach completion vary widely. For example, Steven Pinker comes close to proclaiming a total victory in his 1997 book *How the Mind Works*. Nevertheless, even Pinker's work ends with a list of some important unsolved and perhaps unsolvable mysteries, drawing on work by Chomsky (1975) and philosopher Colin McGinn (1993). And Jerry Fodor strenuously disagrees with Pinker's overall optimism in his 2001 response, *The Mind Doesn't Work that Way*.

Significantly, Fodor's central concerns do not depend on controversial experimental results, which might be corrected or overturned. Instead, they go to the very heart of what computation is, according to Turing's definition. Fodor reminds us that, powerful and general as the notion of computation is, it has certain intrinsic limitations built into it. He presses the point that the computational theory of mind works well for *deductive* forms of reasoning, but it can have no account for *abductive* forms of reasoning—forms of thought that involve inference to the best overall explanation, when there is no way of knowing in advance what facts are relevant. According to Turing, the computations that a computer can perform on an input must depend only on the local, formal, syntactic properties of that input, not on what the input is taken to mean. *By definition*, the most sophisticated computers simply transform strings of 1s and 0s into new strings of 1s and 0s in systematic ways, without any consideration of what those 1s and 0s refer to. Given this, it should be no surprise that well-programmed computers can reason deductively, telling us what conclusions follow because of the *form* of the premises, but they

cannot reason abductively, telling us what conclusions follow because of the *meaning* of the premises. But it is this second kind of reasoning that is more prominent and important in human cognition. Usually the conclusions that one can draw based on deductive logic alone are quite limited and modest—things such as, if all men are mortal and Socrates is a man, then Socrates is mortal. The really interesting conclusions come from integrating, interpreting, and applying real-world knowledge over a broad domain, and computers cannot do this reliably in a limited amount of time. Fodor concludes that the theory of computation gives us an excellent account of one aspect of rationality, but it cannot give us an account of another aspect of rationality, almost by definition. Fodor (2000: 99–101) thus identifies the question of how abductive thought is possible as one of the great mysteries (along with consciousness) that hovers over contemporary cognitive science, without any prospects of a solution on the horizon. He concludes that “What our cognitive science has done so far is mostly to throw some light on how much dark there is.” (See also Heil 1981 for an even more general critique.)

Conclusion

Following Fodor, then, I conclude that cognitive science has shed considerable light on some aspects of the human mind, but it only highlights what is still mysterious in other parts of the human mind. Moreover, the parts that remain unexplained are precisely those parts that have traditionally been taken to be the most religiously significant by theists, such as our reason and our free will. Cognitive science, thus, does not foreclose on the possibility that we have those abilities primarily because we share something significant in common with a rational and free God who in some fashion creates and sustains us.

Related Topics

Chapter 12: Twenty-first-Century Intellectual Life; Chapter 14: Naturalism; Chapter 16: Natural Sciences; Chapter 17: Evolution; Chapter 23: Psychology; Chapter 27: Religious Language

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Recommended Reading

- Baker, M. (2001) *The Atoms of Language: The Mind's Hidden Rules of Grammar*, New York: Basic Books. A readable introduction to the representations of language that linguists posit, emphasizing what all languages have in common.
- Baker, M. and S. Goetz (eds), (2011) *The Soul Hypothesis: Investigations into the Existence of the Soul*, New York: Continuum Press. A set of connected essays arguing that belief in the soul remains viable and productive, touching on issues in neuroscience, psychology, linguistics, and philosophy of mind (as well as physics).
- Fodor, J. (2000) *The Mind Doesn't Work That Way: The Scope and Limits of Computational Psychology*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. A review of some of the foundational concepts of cognitive science, and why they do not add up to a complete theory of mind.
- Gallistel, C. R. and A. P. King (2009) *Memory and the Computational Brain: Why Cognitive Science Will Transform Neuroscience*, Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell. Discusses at length why it is far from straightforward to reduce cognitive science to neuroscience as it is now understood, with examples from animal navigation.
- Pinker, S. (1997) *How the Mind Works*, New York: W.W. Norton. A readable and enthusiastic overview of many of the ideas and results of cognitive science, including evolutionary psychology (but with some limitations recognized at the end).
- Wilson, R. and F. Keil (1999) *The MIT Encyclopedia of the Cognitive Sciences*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. A reference work that illustrates the broad sweep of current cognitive science.

RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

Keith E. Yandell

Those things that are of greatest significance for various religions—God, heaven, nirvana, moksha, Brahman, to mention a few—are not open to visual inspection or tangible grasp. They are not among the things in the “middle-sized” world, somewhere between particles and galaxies. For many thinkers, this has rendered talking about them difficult if not impossible. Non-believers have argued that such talk is meaningless—neither true nor false. Believers have raised their own objections based on features ascribed to their religious ultimates. They sometimes seem in perpetual conflict as to who can make the stronger case that, say, God, cannot be described. Further, believers are sometimes viewed as idolaters by their supposedly more sophisticated co-believers if they do not accept the view that God cannot be described in positive terms. What follows is a look at, and a commentary on, a representative part of this discussion.

Religious Language

“Religious language” refers to uses of language for religious purposes. Declarative sentences that are either true or false are fundamental. “Pray daily” or “Praise God” presuppose a God to be prayed to and praised. A religion describes what it takes to be our deep spiritual disease and its cure, and sets them in a worldview. The rites, rituals, practices, and institutions of a religion will be structured and constrained by the content of that worldview.

The range of religious language includes all the religions. The issues that various uses raise vary and multiply as one goes from one religion to another. Hence some restriction is necessary. We will focus on proposed descriptions of God.

“Meaning To” and “Meaning Of”

There is an ambiguity between “meaning to” and “meaning of.” “Meaning to” refers to life significance, behavior, and affective content. “Meaning of” concerns understanding what must exist for a diagnosis and cure to be correct. It does not follow that one cannot be an expert on Jewish, Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, or any other doctrine without having lived “on the ground.” To understand the propositional meaning of a doctrine is to know what propositions the doctrine entails. To experientially understand the meaning of a doctrine is to view and feel the world from the perspective of a community that embraces it. These are different things, and conflating them—or condemning one because it is not the other—is to yield to (a rather common) confusion.

Irrelevance of Divine Phenomenology

One thing should be dismissed outright. If understanding a property-expressing term applied to God requires that we have a good sense of the divine phenomenology, we are hopeless. We do not know “what it is like” to be omnipotent, omniscient, or the creator. Fortunately, understanding these terms requires nothing of the sort. You are not hampered in your grasp of the claim that God is omnipotent by the fact that you are dismal and worse at imagining what it is like to be omnipotent. I suspect that the assumption is often made that our understanding the properties ascribed to God is constrained to near nothing since we cannot imagine what it is like to be God. It isn’t.

Waving a White Flag

There are views of religious language that attempt to deny it any declarative content or doctrinal assertion. They radically misrepresent, and try to radically alter, religious traditions. Here are two examples.

Some followers of Wittgenstein suppose that religious uses of language constitute a sort of game, or a form of life. The meaning of a term is simply its use within the game or form. Each game or form has its own criteria for justified use of words and sentences and for assessing them in whatever ways are found important. Each game or form constitutes its own cognitive and experiential context that is incommensurable relative to every other. We are somehow able to come to understand a variety of games or forms. We cannot properly ask which game or form has got it right as to how things, including ourselves, are. Thus the diagnosis and cure that a typical religious tradition offers is locked into its own cognitive-affective-behavioral box, and cannot be said to be true. It is just accepted within the box in which those who embrace the tradition live. This is plainly not how the religious traditions typically view themselves. Nor is there any good reason for them to change in this direction (Nielsen and Phillips 2006).

A central platform of contemporary religious pluralism is the idea that religious doctrines are moral imperatives in disguise. Thus, “God loves us” is reduced to “Love one another,” which then makes “We love God because God first loved us” mean “Love one another because we first loved one another.” We are offered, in the name of respecting all religious traditions, the proposal that all of their doctrines be replaced by moral imperatives. This removes the doctrines as possible support of those imperatives. It leaves out the diagnoses of our deep spiritual problem, and the proposed cures, that lie at the center of most religious traditions. For religious pluralists, religious traditions manage neither truth nor falsehood. The reasons offered for this highly implausible view are pragmatic, assuming that if people replace religion by the morality that religious pluralists embrace, peace and justice will increase. There is little reason to believe this, and less to think it will ever happen. Respect for a tradition is not compatible with dismissing its self-understanding as mistaken and its doctrines as lacking literal meaning (Knitter et al. 2009).

The Basic Problem Stated

A being is ineffable just in case no concepts are true of it. The problem of the ineffability theist can be briefly illustrated from Philo and Augustine. In *On Change of Names*, Philo writes:

do not doubt . . . whether that which is more ancient than any existing thing is indescribable . . . We must understand that the expression “The Lord was seen by Abraham” means not as if the Cause of all things had shown forth and become visible.

(Philo 1993: III.5)

Note that the Lord is described as “Cause of all things” and “the most ancient,” which violates being indescribable.

In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine admits that:

God is not even to be called “unspeakable” because to say even this is to speak of Him. Thus there arises a curious contradiction of words, because if the unspeakable is what cannot be spoken of, it is not unspeakable if it can be called unspeakable. And this opposition of words is rather to be avoided by silence than to be explained away by speech.

(Augustine 1990: 199)

To describe the contradiction as “of words” is like saying that whether the accused is guilty or innocent is just “of words.” Contradictions are false in heaven as on earth. Augustine again illustrates the problem when he immediately adds: “And yet God . . . has condescended to accept the worship of men’s mouths, and has desired us through the medium of our own words to rejoice in His praise” (Augustine 1990: 199). The unspeakable God “condescends to accept our worship” and “desired us . . . to rejoice.” The question is: is God impossible to describe, *or* does God condescend, and accept, and desire? Which?—because it cannot be both.

The fundamental difficulty of one who takes the totally ineffable line and accepts religious theism is that there is no reason left to identify the supposed ineffable being with God. A cosmic blank, even could there be such, would be no Creator, Redeemer, Savior, or Lord.

There is something awry here. On the one hand, we are said to know enough about the nature of God to know that God is ineffable. On the other, since, if God exists, God is ineffable, we can know nothing about God’s nature. The concept of an ineffable being requires that the ineffable be such that no concepts apply to it, but also such that it is true of it that it is ineffable. (And also exists; in contrast to Aristotelian tradition, I take “exists” to be univocal across genera). So the concept of an ineffable being joins the concept of being a round square in the basket of concepts that cannot be true of anything. To put the point differently: we have to know enough about God in order to justifiably claim that God is ineffable, even though it is true of God that God is ineffable.

Maimonides

Consider the following characteristic statements from Maimonides:

God, may He be exalted, cannot be apprehended by the intellect and . . . not but He himself can apprehend what He is.

(Maimonides 1964: 119)

[E]very attribute that we predicate of Him is an attribute of an action, or . . . it signifies the negation of the privation of the attribute in question.
(Maimonides 1964: 133)

[I]f one describes God by means of affirmations . . . one implies . . . that He is associated with that which is not He and implies a deficiency in Him.
(Maimonides 1964: 136)

Thus, to attribute justice to God is to say that an action of God is of the sort that, were we to perform it, it would derive from our sense of justice, and to say that God is just is to say that God is not unjust. All of God's actions "are carried out by means of His essence, and . . . not by means of a superadded notion" and God's essence is ineffable so it cannot be true that it carries anything out (Maimonides 1964: 139).

For Maimonides, candidates for univocal descriptive sentences fall into five kinds: attribution of an essence, part of an essence, a non-essential property, a relation, or an action. Only the last is permitted, and it tells us nothing about God. One cannot even univocally say that God exists, since God exists in a different manner, and hence a different sense, than that in which we exist. Supposedly the meaning of "exists" varies across the types of things to which existence is ascribed, and is not univocal even between a cactus and a crocodile, let alone between Abraham and God. Further: "when we say *one*, the meaning is that He has no equal and not that the notion of oneness attaches to His essence" (Maimonides 1964: 118). But why suppose "has no equal" (and no equal what?) is true of a being that is ineffable, and if it is why does "one" not apply?

One might think that if God created the world, then there is the relation *being the creator of* between God and the world. But:

How . . . could a relation hold between Him, may He be exalted, and any of the things created by Him, given the immense difference between them with regard to the true reality of their existence, than which there is no greater difference?

(Maimonides 1964: 133)

Two philosophical doctrines ground these claims: divine necessity (God cannot be caused) and simplicity: "God is existent of necessity and . . . there is no composition in Him . . . It is impossible that He should have affirmative attributes" (Maimonides 1964: 135). These views put Maimonides plainly in the tradition of negative theology.

Negative or Apophatic Theology

Negative theology is a negative thesis. It has no theology to speak of. The governing idea of negativism or apophatism is that while we can say what God is not, we cannot say what God is. On this view, if you say that God is not ignorant, you cannot be properly reported as saying that God is omniscient. After all, your average rock is not ignorant if to be ignorant is to be capable of having knowledge but in fact having none. But why can't God be understood to be omniscient? The issue here is not whether there is some theologically satisfactory and non-contradictory notion of divine omniscience. If there is not, then both sides of the dispute typically will grant that it then can't be true

that God is omniscient. The issue is whether, if it is true of something that it is capable of knowledge, and is in no degree ignorant, it does not follow that it is omniscient. It certainly seems to follow, but the negativist or the apophaticist must deny this. God is not impotent regarding moving a mountain but cannot properly be said to be able to move a feather. God is not unloving but cannot properly be said to love.

The negativist or apophaticist must offer some reason for accepting her view without ascribing any property to God in virtue of which no property can be ascribed to God. What negative predicates are true of must have some properties, and so some non-negative predicates are true of it. The strongest attempt to avoid this result will say that for any predicate P, whether positive or negative, P is not true of God. But the negativist does not want to say this. She thinks that negative predicates are true of God. But if *not being ignorant* is true of God, then so is *being incapable of knowledge or possessing knowledge*, or else we do not know even what we are denying of God. *Not being ignorant* is deprived of the entailments on which its meaning depends.

Further, why think it is God of whom the apophaticist does not speak? All positive descriptive content is denied to the concept of God. Why then think that there is anything to which the word refers? More precisely, why think that the mark or sound "God" is a word or expresses a concept or might name anything? If one says that nothing expressing a concept, positive or negative, is true of God—God is "beyond all concepts"—then there is no basis left for saying that it is God that is beyond all concepts. It is not even possible to say that there is something or other that is beyond all concepts. To say this would require that the something exist and is unreachable by any concept and by the former would satisfy the concept of being existent and by the latter satisfy the concept of being unreachable by concepts. Thus the claim that there is this something is necessarily false.

Aquinas

Aquinas is generally read as holding that no term used univocally is true of God and us. But he adds that "omnipotent" and "omniscient," used univocally, are true of God and false of us. This makes a significant point: that literal description of God does not require univocity of property-expressing terms being true of both God and us. There are literal truths about God even if no term is univocally and truly predicated of God and creatures. Aquinas adds that:

There are . . . words . . . that simply mean certain perfections without any indication of how these perfections are possessed—words, for example, like "being," "good," "living," and so on. These can be used literally of God . . . These words have a bodily context not in what they mean but in the way in which they signify it.

(Aquinas 1948: Ia. q.13, art. 1–10)

The idea here seems to be that there are different ways of being, being good, and living, but that there is a core of meaning in common that is true of those of whom the predicates "being," "good," and "living" are true. Perhaps we can put the point more formally as follows: there are properties that God possesses in a manner appropriate to deity, and a non-divine person possesses in a manner appropriate for creatures. The predicates that are used to ascribe these properties share some of their meaning, and such words as

“being,” “good,” and “living” are such that “these words can be used literally of God.” That this is fully consistent with the rest of his views on such matters is not obvious. It does express a position that gives the possibility of a wider range than otherwise of predicates being used univocally of God and us. Aquinas notes:

Aristotle says that words are signs of things and thoughts are likenesses of things so words refer to things indirectly through thoughts . . . It is the knowledge we have of creatures that enables us to use words to refer to God and so these words do not express the essence of God as it is in itself.

(Aquinas 1948: Ia. Q. 15, art. 1)

The divine essence is off limits, but there is accessible territory in the similarity between items described by analogy.

Aquinas rejects the view that all predicates used to describe God are negative and the view that apparent ascriptions of properties to God are descriptions of God’s actions. He rejects the view that to say that God is good is to say that God creates good things. If you say that, why not say that God is material since God created the material things? The range of predicates that would then be “true of God” would include many of those true of created things.

Those who say that God is good do not mean simply to deny wickedness to God or to say that God causes good things. They mean to ascribe the property *being good* to God. This is possible because there is resemblance between goodness in created agents and in God. If we follow the line described above, ascription of the similarity is literal and true, not to be reduced to denials or actions.

For Aquinas at least four factors limit the literal ascription of what grounds this resemblance to God. Take the example “is good.” God is simple; God has goodness essentially; God is the source of goodness; God has goodness to the highest possible degree.

According to the doctrine of simplicity, God has no parts, and for any predicates P and Q that are true of God, the referent of P and the referent of Q are identical. So God has but one property to which God is identical. This doctrine comes from Greek philosophy and is rejected or ignored by many contemporary philosophical theologians. It is far too complex to receive its deserved discussion here. My suggestion is simply that if the doctrine produces insuperable difficulties for religious language, then it can (and should) be rejected.

Necessity comes into play in two ways. First, God is necessarily good. It does not follow from this that “good” means something different when ascribed to God and Mother Teresa. It is a necessary truth that there are two twos in four, and a contingent fact there are four dogs in the kennel, but “four” is univocal. Second, God has necessary existence. Suppose there are everlasting abstract objects and everlasting souls. Abstracta and souls are different kinds of things, but “everlasting” means the same thing as applied to both. Souls are in time, (according to Aquinas) angels exist and are in time, but “in time” is univocal though each belongs to its own kind. That God causes goodness in others, and has it to the highest possible degree, does not prevent “goodness” from being univocal. Suppose some item X has a property Q to the highest degree possible—say, omniscience or knowledge to an unsurpassable degree. Suppose Y has Q to a lesser degree. Thus the predicate “has knowledge to some degree” is univocally true of God and Mother Teresa; for God to cause knowledge in Teresa entails making a predicate true of God true of her as well.

Concept Empiricism

The view that religious language is meaningless has been offered concerning words and sentences. The idea is that only words that name sensory qualities express concepts, or only sentences that can be confirmed or disconfirmed by sensory experiences are true or false, where “sensory” includes perception and introspection (see Hume 2011). Our concepts cannot outrun our sensory experience nor can our sentences transcend what the senses can reach. Indefinable descriptive words get their meaning by naming observable qualities, and definable words are but combinations of indefinable words. True sentences correctly report observable states of affairs and false sentences misreport the same. In addition, there are sentences whose truth or falsehood is determined by arbitrary definitions.

Sensory experience is awareness of observable qualities and terms that name them cannot describe God, nor can sensory experience by itself confirm or disconfirm that God exists. So “God” is just a mark or sound, and “God exists” expresses no claim. These claims contain a theory of meaning for words, but neither “theory” nor “meaning” are meaningful on the terms that the theory states. They also contain a theory of meaning for sentences, but the theory that meaningful sentences must be observationally confirmable or disconfirmable, or be true or false by definition, itself cannot be confirmed or disconfirmed by observation. Nor is the theory true by definition. So it is without meaning on its own terms, and so raises no problem for religious language.

One further point is worth making. Our system of beliefs is full of theories, some simple and some complex. These theories are not simply composed of perceptual reports, but delve into causal accounts of events, layers of laws of increasing scope, theoretical entities posited to account for observable effects, and the like. Typically these theories are underdetermined by the data to which they appeal for confirmation in the sense that it is logically possible that the observational data be as reported and some other theory regarding those data be correct. Assessment of such theories is not merely observational.

Logical Positivism

One might wonder whether Hume’s verification empiricism—his theory of the meaningfulness of sentences—was not on the right track and needed only to be made more precise by later work in logic. Logical Positivism tried this. The Logical Positivists, such as A. J. Ayer (1978), in effect took verification empiricism and ran it through the machinery of Whitehead’s and Russell’s *Principia Mathematica*. If Hume’s verification empiricism can be refined by appeal to logical rigor, this strategy should reveal that. A brief consideration of some key issues will tell us whether verificationism, suitably polished, can pass muster. (VP)—the Verification Principle—underwent myriad criticisms and revisions, some of which we will explore.

First some definitions:

1. A protocol statement is true if and only if it is true of the sense data possessed by the person who reports having it.
2. A physical object statement is true if and only if the object it reports as existing or having an observable property does exist or has the observable property the statement says it has.
3. A tautology is a statement that is true by definition.

These types of statements, and their denials, pass Positivist muster. So does:

4. Any statement that follows from statements of types 1–3 by some rule of inference included in *Principia Mathematica*.

We can now state one version of the verification principle of Logical Positivism.

(VP) For any alleged sentence S, S is meaningful (i.e., is either true or false) if and only if S is a protocol sentence, a physical object sentence, or a tautology, or S follows from some finite set of sentences each of which falls into one or another of these three classes (or is a denial of some such statement).

It should be noted that nothing in verificationism requires that one actually have observational evidence for or against a sentence that passes its test. It requires only that having some such evidence is logically possible.

A little reflection shows that (VP) itself falls into none of (1), (2), or (3). That leaves only (4), and it can be argued that (VP) fits there. If it does, this is so because of a rule that allows this inference:

Addition:

1. P

Therefore:

2. P or Q. (Where [P or Q] is true unless both are false.)

On this understanding of “or,” if P is true, then [P or Q] is true. We can then take some observation statement such as “Some pigs are pink” and infer to “Some pigs are pink or (VP).” Since this unusual statement satisfies the (VP) criterion, its components must have truth value, so (VP) is meaningful after all.

The price of this maneuver is high, consider this argument:

1. Some pigs are pink.

So: 2*. Some pigs are pink or the number two wears tutus.

If the previous argument shows that (VP) passes its own test, this argument shows that the “The number two wears tutus” is meaningful. This opens the floodgates. But if the argument does not show that (VP) has truth value, then (VP) itself falls outside its own class of meaningful statements, and hence is meaningless on those terms, and is no threat to anything.

An easy response is that neither argument shows that anything has truth value, because the rule Addition only applies to what has truth value. The equally easy response is that this is correct, and hence the (VP) does not rule out that “The number two wears tutus” lacks truth value, but rather presupposes this. The second argument is rejected on that ground. The same lines of reasoning apply, of course, if we replace “The number two wears tutus” by “God exists.”

Some defenders of (VP) replied to the criticisms by saying that we don’t expect weighing machines to weigh themselves. The point presumably was that it is unreasonable to

expect a theory of meaning to be meaningful on its own terms. But it plainly isn't unreasonable to expect that, and if it is meaningful even though it violates its own conditions for meaning, then meeting those conditions cannot be necessary for being meaningful. But the basic point is that if an alleged theory of meaning is nonsense, then it isn't a theory of meaning after all, and if it is both meaningful and violates its own conditions for being meaningful then it is a counter-example unto itself, and so false.

Another suggestion was that one take the (VP), not as a theory of meaning, but as a recommendation as to what to take to be meaningful. It then amounts to something in the neighborhood of *Treat only protocol sentences, physical object sentences, and tautological sentences, and their denials and entailments, as being true or false.* (VP) becomes a recommendation or a command, depending on how polite the verificationist who utters it happens to be.

I suppose if some philosophers want to make recommendations or give orders, they can do so, but in the absence of any good reason to follow the recommendations or obey the orders, we get nowhere. Once we are no longer being offered the (VP) as a theory of meaning, we can safely ignore it.

Perhaps, then, the thing to do is simply give up on the project of offering a successful empiricist theory of meaning. Later attempts suggested that *the sense of a word (or a sentence) is given by its use or the meaning of a term (or a sentence) is determined by its common sense context or by its ordinary language setting.* Such theories are hard to put clearly, and if they have anything like verificationist intentions it is hard to see that they are any more successful than Humean or Logical Positivist attempts. A theory of meaning isn't itself going to have much of a common sense context, an ordinary language setting, or a use outside rather technical disputes. If our language can "stretch" (if any stretching is needed) to allow for theorizing about meaning or use, it isn't at all clear that it can't also "stretch" (if any stretching is needed) to allow us to say things that people say all the time outside the context of offering empiricist theories of meaning, descriptions of God, for example. But let us see.

Antony Flew

In his characteristic style, Flew writes:

A fine brash hypothesis may . . . be killed by a thousand qualifications. And in this, it seems to me, lies the peculiar danger . . . of theological utterances . . . such as "God loves us as a father loves his children". . . . They [are] at first sight very much like . . . vast cosmological assertions . . . [T]o assert that such and such is the case is necessarily equivalent to denying that such and such is not the case . . . , to know the meaning of the negation of an assertion, is as near as makes no matter, to know the meaning of that assertion. And if there is nothing which a putative assertion denies then there is nothing that it asserts either.

(Flew and McIntyre 1955: 96)

Flew supposes that if a person will not grant, given whatever evidence, that a putative proposition is false, then when she speaks the sentence that expresses the proposition, there is nothing that she means. This confuses the meaning of the proposition with the willingness of its assenter to abandon it. A person who says that he is the moon might

not be uttering gibberish, but revealing a false belief, possession of which could raise questions about his sanity. The mentally ill are not babblers, but holders of particularly unfortunate false beliefs. Perhaps what Flew intends is that if we can have no evidence against a contingent proposition, then the culprit in question is no proposition after all. But then *Nothing that is alive now will be alive a second from now* will be meaningless on this criterion, which it is not. Further, that “P” is logically identical to “Not-(Not-P)” yields no substantive doctrine of meaning.

What would do so is the claim that, if someone counts proposition Q as a reason to reject proposition P, then Q is part of the meaning of P’s negation (and not-Q is part of P’s meaning). This makes the meaning of P massively indeterminate. If I would take *A fly flies* to be a reason for rejecting *God exists*, then part of the meaning of *God does not exist* is *A fly flies* and part of the meaning of *God exists* is *A fly does not fly*. Meaning is not so whimsical. Perhaps the idea is that if the truth of Q is evidence against P, then Q is part of the meaning of P’s negation. But then Q1. *Tom is in Idaho* and Q2. *Tom is in Ireland*, being incompatible with *Tom is in Maine*, are part of the meaning of *Tom is not in Maine*. Then, since the conjunct of Q1 and Q2 is necessarily false, *Tom is in Maine* is necessarily true (see Plantinga 1967: chapter 7). So these efforts fail to show that *God exists* is without meaning. (Or perhaps we are offered the old falsifiability theory of meaning embraced by Logical Positivists, considered above.)

Terrence Penelhum

In *Survival and Disembodied Existence* (1970), Penelhum claims that disembodied existence is an unintelligible notion, and therefore there is no such thing. Aimed against immortality, the argument applies equally to God. The argument asks what public criterion could be used to discover that a disembodied person retained identity as the same person over time—what could we do to reidentify an allegedly disembodied person as the same person as one who was encountered previously? Then it is argued that there are no public criteria by which such reidentification could be accomplished. The conclusion is that the notion of a disembodied person continuing to exist over time is unintelligible. It isn’t formally contradictory. It is just senseless. Presumably the notion of an *unembodied* person is no better off, which of course has implications for the intelligibility of the concept of God. This is one application of the ordinary language philosophy prevalent when the argument was offered.

There are two relevant questions here: (i) what conditions would have to be satisfied if something is to be a disembodied or unembodied person who survives over time?; (ii) how could we tell that some disembodied or unembodied person existed over time? The second question asks how we could tell that the conditions stated in answer to the first question actually obtained. Penelhum’s argument is that there isn’t any good answer to the second question, and so there isn’t any good answer to the first question either. An obvious answer to the first question is that there must be a conscious being who was embodied before time T (for a person to be embodied is for her to be in a complex causal relationship to one body rather than to other bodies, or to none), is capable of self-consciousness, and is not embodied at time T. Then that being must continue to exist and not be embodied at least through time T1; then a disembodied being will have existed through a span of time. For an unembodied being to do so, we need to add a different condition—it must not previously have been embodied nor may it become so. To be God this being must be omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect.

These are answers that those who hold the view defended by Penelhum will reject. His view is that unless there is a good answer to the *how could we tell the conditions are met?* question, there isn't any possible answer to the *what conditions would have to be met?* question. This raises the issue that we seem then to have to answer the first question in order to be able to answer the second question, and we can't answer the second question unless we have already answered the first. It won't do to say that what we must do is to consider candidates for an answer to the first question, and then discover that we could not tell that the conditions proposed ever actually held true of anything. The most that would then follow is that we couldn't tell whether there are disembodied or unembodied persons, not that the notion of such persons is unintelligible.

The critic of Penelhum's argument will contend that the proposition expressed by *Sentence S is meaningful if and only if there is some public criterion by which one can confirm or disconfirm it* is not itself part of our ordinary discourse. It is a bit of philosophical doctrine, and stands condemned on its own terms, if not being commonsensical condemns a view. In addition, that one or more unembodied persons exist has been widely held by common folk with no apparent belief in literal nonsense. Nor will it help to claim that *Any true description of our present linguistic practices is normative regarding the meaningfulness of any sentence*, since that too is a piece of unabashed philosophy which, on the terms of the perspective it defines, gives it no support.

Common sense or ordinary language philosophers appealed as much to doctrines not contained in common sense, and not confirmed by appeal to ordinary language, as did their opponents.

Peter Geach

In *God and the Soul* (1999) Geach offers what we will call *View One*:

[W]ords like pain or seeing do not get their meaning from either the very experience so named, or from a private uncheckable performance of conferring their meaning. And we do not know how to apply such concepts to immaterial beings.

(Geach 1999: ix)

His comments directly target the disembodied existence of human persons, but are applicable to God. The idea is ultimately to separate perceptual and affective concepts from purely cognitive concepts, and claim that only the latter apply to God. The basis for doing so is that words express concepts and no concept is an island. Each concept gets its sense, and thus each descriptive word gets its meaning (or use) from the role that it plays in a conceptual (or linguistic) system. In the case of such concepts as perceiving, an essential part of the conceptual territory that they occupy is composed of concepts of bodies, bodily movements, spatial location, and the like. In the case of affective concepts, bodily sensations, movements, and expressions provide essential context. Without these concepts of the physical, perceptual (and affective) concepts cannot play their role in everyday discourse. The words that express these concepts lose much of their meaning when used of something immaterial—so much so that words that typically express a meaning (or have a use) no longer do so and thus become meaningless. Since the same sounds and marks are made, one typically does not notice that one has wandered off into meaningless verbal exercises.

Support for this view could come from:

(L) The circumstance or context in which a word is created (in which a sound or mark gets meaning or use) is the only sort of circumstance or context in which it can be used.

Insofar as one gets the gist of (L), however, it seems clearly false. One mark of understanding a language is the ability to use it, and understand its uses, in new situations.

Sensory perception by unembodied minds is, for Geach, not so much impossible as meaningless. If sensory experience is defined as sensory content conveyed through sensory organs, then unembodied persons are exempt. But what of conscious states with perceptual (say, color and shape) content, caused by material objects or not? An omnipotent being presumably could have such conscious states at will. If it is claimed that such experiences must be from some point of view, perhaps this is so. If so, then appearing to be from a point of view should do, and that would be possible. There is the objection that we cannot discern such conscious states, and what cannot be discerned from a third-person point of view cannot be intelligibly described. Widely held, the view runs against what seems the clear possibility of imagining oneself, or someone else, being in such states. The contrary view relies on a connection between meaning and verification that does not have an enviable history. Consider *View Two*, which parallels Geach as quoted above:

Words like *knowing* or *thinking* do not get their meaning from either the very experience so named, or from a private uncheckable performance of conferring their meaning. And we do not know how to apply such concepts to immaterial beings.

Geach does not accept this line of reasoning concerning such concepts as knowing, thinking, and creating. He writes: "There are propositions saying of some agent that he brought something about; these will obviously be needed in talking about God's activity" (Geach 1999: xv).

Whether or not God can have conscious states with perceptual content is far less crucial for theism than God's being a rational agent. Here, too, there is a cluster of conceptual connections: thinking, understanding, inferring, choosing, and doing, among many others. Whether one views God as eternal or everlasting, bodily and spatial location concepts will not apply. Here we must apply our concepts of rational agency to an unembodied being—to God and to other unembodied minds—whether or not one wants to grant that this sort of mind can be human. So doing seems no more problematic than allowing that an unembodied mind might have experiences with sensory content. There is the controversial Rationalist view that such experiences are confused, and this would remove God from being their possible owner, but that view is controversial and not one to which Geach appeals. As we have seen, Geach embraces *View One* but not *View Two*. We have argued that *View One* is discredited. It is not a necessary truth that thought requires correlated brain states, let alone identity to such states, and if an unembodied being can think, there seems no problem with the rest of the relevant cluster of concepts also applying. Thus *View Two* is false. A Humean empiricist would accept both; we have seen reason not to follow Hume in these matters.

Conclusion

Reference and application of concepts to God is a logically necessary condition of belief in God. Those who claim to believe, but contend for divine ineffability in the sense described in this chapter, hold an inconsistent view. Were they to become consistent with their view concerning ineffability, they would not be worshipping an idol, or be atheists or agnostics. Neither would they be theists. There would be nothing whatever that was both logically consistent with their view and with what they believed about God. The closest they could come to their view about ineffability would be to assent to the claim that the word “God” has no meaning.

There are two conclusions suggested by the argument given here (there are, as always, responses, and responses to them). One is that the idea that ascribing properties to God is impossible rests on bad arguments and mistaken views. The other is that Augustinian silence, without inconsistency, cannot be supplemented by claims about God’s condescension.

Related Topics

Chapter 1: Western Philosophy; Chapter 4: Christianity; Chapter 13: Evidence; Chapter 19: Philosophical Methodology; Chapter 20: Philosophy of Religion; Chapter 36: Religious Diversity

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ARGUMENTS FROM EVIL

Trent Dougherty and Jerry L. Walls

Classical theism and the problem of evil have enjoyed an intriguing, yet hostile relationship for centuries, if not millennia. Despite the fact that proponents of theism would be happy to eliminate the problem of evil if they could, and many atheistic proponents of the problem would gladly discredit theism once and for all if they could, the fact remains that the longstanding celebrity and fascination of the problem of evil owe their existence to classical theism. For evil is precisely a problem in a very distinctive way for theism that it is not for other worldviews, particularly its main rival, naturalism. This is not to say that suffering, death, and existential anguish are not problems for naturalists, but they are not so in the same sense as they are for theists. For given the claim of classical theism that the ultimate reality is a God of perfect goodness and power, the question quickly becomes urgent why these terrible things should exist at all, let alone devastate our lives the way they often do. By contrast, if ultimate reality consists of matter, natural laws and the like, and naturalistic evolution is the true account of our origins, then disease, suffering, natural disasters, and death are hardly to be unexpected. That does not make these matters pleasant or easy to cope with, but there is no reason to be surprised or outraged at such harsh realities if Mother Nature is the ultimate architect of our world. Nor is there the same sort of demand to make sense of them as there is if a God of perfect goodness and power exists.

This chapter considers the main forms of arguments from evil both against and for God's existence. In view of the legacy just mentioned, it might be something of a surprise to learn that considerations pertaining to evil can actually be used to promote the belief that there is a God. Upon further reflection, however, it might be recalled that there is a long tradition holding that, in some way, the very distinction between good and evil or right and wrong (philosophers debate the exact relation between these two distinctions) rests on or crucially involves God. C. S. Lewis (2001) begins his book, *Mere Christianity*, with a section entitled "Right and Wrong As a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe."

Still, we begin with anti-theistic arguments from evil. Such arguments come in many forms. We focus on fairly regimented arguments to make the philosophical issues, which for our purposes we must keep distinct from the existential issues, as clear and explicit as we can within the constraints of a survey chapter. We consider both deductive and inductive arguments. Among inductive arguments, we consider a more formal probabilistic argument and a less formal explanatory argument. After stating the arguments and

assessing their plausibility, we turn to consider three distinct arguments for the existence of God from considerations pertaining to evil. We conclude with reflection on the rationality of theistic belief in the light of these arguments, and suggest that theism is a two-edged sword with respect to evil.

Deductive Anti-Theistic Arguments from Evil

Perhaps the oldest and certainly one of the simplest formal arguments against the existence of God from evil is the following.

Argument A

1. If there is a God of infinite power and goodness, then there is no evil.
2. But there is evil.
3. So there is not a God of infinite power and goodness.

Another once-popular version is similar and more explicit.

Argument B

1. If God were all loving, he would want to eliminate evil.
2. If God were all powerful, he could eliminate evil.
3. But there is evil.
4. So if there is a God, he must either not be all loving or not be all powerful.

Note that these arguments can be construed in quite different ways. If it is simply part of the definition of “God” that He be omnipotent and omnibenevolent, then the deductive argument more readily yields the blunt conclusion that “There is no God.” Another line of reply “bites the bullet” and accepts that God is either not all loving or not all powerful. Deists would opt for the former, though there are very few defending that position today. It is somewhat more common for theorists to deny that God is all powerful. Some advocates of process theology opt for this route. However, most people in the Judeo-Christian tradition of classical theism think that any being without these attributes would not be worthy of the title “God.” And this is why the problem of evil has the particularly intimate relationship with classical theism we noted in the introduction. It is precisely the strong claims about God that classical theists insist upon that generates the problem of evil and raises the pointed questions about why it exists.

Our first assessment of the deductive argument against the existence of God will focus on Argument B. Note that the argument depends on the following assumption: If God wanted to eliminate evil, and God could eliminate evil, then evil would be eliminated. This assumption is ambiguous between two readings.

Assumption (i): If God wanted to eliminate evil, and God could eliminate evil, then evil would be eliminated eventually.

Assumption (ii): If God wanted to eliminate evil, and God could eliminate evil, then evil would be eliminated now.

The first version of the assumption is reasonable but unhelpful for the argument. The second assumption is what the argument needs, since premise (3) is present tense, but it is far less reasonable. Given that there's nothing relevantly special about the present moment, the only justification for the second version of the assumption would be the following.

Assumption (iii): If God wanted to eliminate evil, and God could eliminate evil, then evil would be eliminated at all times (or would never have existed in the first place).

But why think that? If there is some greater good that evil might serve, then it is reasonable to suppose that for some period of time evil might be allowed. This is exactly what the Judeo-Christian tradition asserts: that there was once no evil; that there is evil now; that evil will one day be eliminated. We have more to say about this below, but one common reason offered for why God would allow a period of suffering is that he wants humans to exercise morally significant free will and grow in virtue as they struggle against evil.

Recall the form of argument A.

Argument A

1. If there is a God of infinite power and goodness, then there is no evil.
2. But there is evil.
3. So there is not a God of infinite power and goodness.

Like all deductive arguments that are not wholly abstract, there is one “observational” premise (this is why the usual classification of the problem of evil into the “logical” problem and “evidential” problem is misleading). The observational premise of Argument A is premise (2). Premise (2) is reasonable because we look around us and in fact see instances of evil. The trouble with Argument A was its premise (1). But now consider the following revised argument.

Argument C

1. If there is a God of infinite power and goodness then there is no unjustified evil.
2. There are instances of unjustified evil.
3. Therefore there is no God.

This time, premise (1) seems true by definition, or nearly so. So in that regard it starts off much stronger than Argument A (and Argument B was just a fleshing out of Argument A). However, now it is premise (2) that is problematic. For though it is easy to verify that there are evils in the world—for example, people and animals suffering—it is not easy to verify that these evils are unjustified. We can tell by looking that someone is suffering. But we cannot tell by looking that the suffering is unjustified. Argument C is essentially the argument defended by William Rowe (see Howard-Snyder 1996).

So, why think there are instances of unjustified evil? Well, there are certainly instances of evil for which we can think of no reason for their occurrence. Here it is best to introduce some standard terminology. We've used the term “unjustified evil.” Let's

say that an evil is unjustified if it is “gratuitous” in the sense that it is not a means to some greater good or necessary to avoid some equal or worse evil. A justification would be some greater good for which it was necessary or some equally bad or worse evil for which it was necessary to avoid. Let us call an evil for which we can discern no justification an “inscrutable” evil. Now this is a very important distinction, and we must be clear that there are many inscrutable evils, ranging from the death of a fawn in a forest fire to the Holocaust. But the inference from the existence of inscrutable evils to gratuitous evils is problematic and we cannot simply slide from one to the other or take it for granted that they are the same. Indeed, it seems the inference must take something like the following form.

Noseeum Inference (i): I can’t think of a reason, so there is no reason.

This has come to be called a “noseeum” inference (see Wykstra in Howard-Snyder 1996) after the noseeum bugs which are so tiny you never even see them when they’re biting you. It is an inference from absence of evidence to evidence of absence. This kind of inference is warranted only under special conditions. The inference has been characterized rather uncharitably perhaps, so consider the following version:

Noseeum Inference (ii): No human can think of a reason, so there probably isn’t one.

Even if the inference were valid, it is not clear that the antecedent is true. First, some humans have indeed proposed reasons why these things happen (see Swinburne 1998 and Stump 2010, for example). Second, even if the antecedent is true, it’s not at all clear, given our cognitive limitations, that our general inability to think of a reason for things on such a large scale even makes it probable that there is no such reason (see several of the replies to Rowe in Howard-Snyder 1996). This line of thought is typically called “skeptical theism” precisely because its proponents are fond of pressing the point that our inability to think of such reasons hardly makes it even remotely likely that there are none.

One alternative move to try to cut through this skepticism is to claim to see, directly, that there could be no justification for something so horrendous as the Holocaust. In keeping with the above titles, we might dub this the:

Iseeit Claim: I clearly perceive there could be no possible justification for some of the evils in our world.

In this case, of course, there would be no inference at all, much less a noseeum inference. This might seem a more promising way to go, since none of the replies of the skeptical theists mentioned above seem to apply to this version of the argument. Furthermore, the plausibility of this claim is enhanced by Rowe’s argument that God has the power to give us the ability to understand and a loving God with this power would do so.

However, skeptical theists are no less dubious of this move. Bergmann (2009), for instance, questions the ability to see unjustifiability directly and notes that the question of whether God would give us the ability to understand only moves the question to a new instance of the same inference: I can’t think of a reason God wouldn’t give us the ability to understand, so there must not be one.

Inductive Anti-Theistic Arguments

Inductive arguments are somewhat more sophisticated than deductive arguments, which can be a bit flat-footed. Deductive arguments appear to entail that the existence of God is logically incompatible with the existence of evil. This is a tough row to hoe, since it at least seems possible that the freedom-and-virtue response is true. The very possibility of the truth of that story is enough to show that God and evil are not logically incompatible.

However, there are other kinds of arguments which make the much more modest and seemingly plausible claim that evil is evidence that God does not exist. If this were the case, then if one didn't have evidence for God's existence that was strong enough to more than offset this evidence against God's existence, then one could rationally at best be agnostic.

This "evidential" problem of evil is regimented in two kinds of arguments: more formally in probabilistic arguments, and less formally—but very similarly—in explanatory arguments. Readers with an aversion to symbols might prefer to skip the following section and go on to the explanatory arguments.

A Probabilistic Argument

The most regimented inductive anti-theistic argument from evil is cast in terms of probability. William Rowe (in Howard-Snyder 1996) has devised this clever argument. Consider the following claim.

P: No good we know of justifies an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being in permitting E1 and E2 (where E1 and E2 are instances of particularly horrendous suffering which we know to have occurred).

Let G be the proposition that God exists.

The question is how—assuming a "level playing field," that is, assuming that $\Pr(G) = \Pr(\sim G) = \Pr(P) = \Pr(\sim P)$ —one's learning P would affect one's credence in G. Here is a representation of Rowe's reasoning.

1. Assume: $\Pr(G) = \Pr(\sim G) = \Pr(P) = \Pr(\sim P)$. (Rowe's "level playing field.")
2. Assume $\Pr(G) > 0$. (Granted by sane atheists.)
3. Assume: $\Pr(P/G) < 1$. (Granted by sane theists.)
4. $\Pr(P/G) < \Pr(P/\sim G) \text{ @ } \Pr(G/P) < \Pr(G/\sim P)$. (Theorem.)
5. $\sim G \rightarrow P$. (By Rowe's definition of P.)
6. $\Pr(P/\sim G) = 1$. (From 5.)
7. $\Pr(P/G) < \Pr(P/\sim G)$. (From 3 and 6.)
8. $\Pr(G/P) < \Pr(G/\sim P)$, i.e. P (relatively) disconfirms G. (From 4 and 7.)

An immediate problem with this argument is that premise (5) might seem unjustified, for even if there were no God, we might be aware of goods which are such that, were there a God, they would justify God in allowing evil. This premise, however, is a result of the way Rowe defines P. For note that "justifies" is a success verb. It is impossible for something to justify God if there is no God. Bergmann suggests that the premise be changed to say "No good is 'known by us' to justify" This would bring $\Pr(P/G)$ below 1, but it would still remain high.

The deeper problem with this argument, however, is that even if the conclusion is true, it doesn't say anything at all about the extent to which evil disconfirms theism. It might be that it lowers its probability by a tenth of a percent as far as this argument shows. It could only do more if one had reason to believe $\Pr(P/G)$ was much lower than $\Pr(P/\sim G)$; that is, if it were very surprising that we did not understand why God allowed suffering, given God's existence. As we will see below, that claim is heavily disputed.

Explanatory Arguments

Probabilistic arguments leave some people cold, others confused, and some both. Thankfully, much the same point can be made in terms of explanation. In particular, the pattern of inference called "Inference to the Best Explanation" (IBE) is frequently used in science and philosophy (indeed, it seems to be used anywhere people are seeking rational explanations).

An IBE works like this. You start with a set of competing hypotheses, and a body of evidence. Then you see how each hypothesis does with respect to a set of theoretical virtues—things that make an explanation good—relative to that body of evidence. We will limit the theoretical virtues we consider to two: explanatory power and simplicity.

We can think of explanatory power as the ability to convert surprise into expectation. If you have ever watched a legal or crime scene investigation show on television or read a detective novel, then you understand the notion of explanatory power. In a good detective novel, there are all kinds of surprises, but then, when the brilliant detective gives her explanation, we see how, if that hypothesis is true, we should expect all these otherwise surprising phenomena to occur.

If you recall the story of the "Copernican Revolution" then you have a grasp of how simplicity is a good-making feature of explanations. Perhaps you've heard of the "principle of parsimony" or "Ockham's Razor" (though Aquinas said it first). The principle is simple: you don't postulate any more than is necessary to explain the data.

The data in question in this case consist of all the suffering we know to have occurred. For our purposes there are two rival explanations: theism and atheism. The question is "How does each of these hypotheses fare with respect to one another relative to those evils according to explanatory power and simplicity?"

David Hume seems to have had this form of argument in mind when he proposed an argument from evil in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Paul Draper is the chief modern proponent of this version of the argument. We present here an abbreviated version. There are two key claims involved in the explanatory argument from evil corresponding to the two theoretical virtues involved.

Version A

Explanatory claim: Naturalism explains the suffering in the world better than theism.

Simplicity claim: Naturalism is a simpler explanation than theism.

If these two claims can be justified, then clearly naturalism would be the better explanation. Sometimes, ironically, the best explanation isn't even a good explanation, but that's a problem we can set aside for now.

First, why might one think the explanatory claim is true? One natural way to understand explanation is in terms of “expectability.” The hypothesis that Jones stole the money explains the fact that his fingerprints are on the safe in that on the assumption that Jones stole the money, it is not at all surprising that his fingerprints are on the safe. In fact, it might even be expected. So we can translate the explanatory claim into an expectation claim.

Expectation claim: Naturalism leads one to expect the pattern of suffering in the world more so than theism.

Though this claim will be challenged below, it has an air of plausibility. For one way to describe the pattern of suffering in the world is that the world “seems indifferent” to suffering. The world does not seem to be set up in a way to distribute pain and suffering in accordance with anything like justice or dessert, for example. And if naturalism were true there would be no reason to expect that it would be. Suffering seems to come at random and with utter disregard to the moral character of the persons it affects. And that seems to be just what we’d expect if naturalism were true.

On the other hand, if there were a perfectly loving God, it seems God would want to distribute pain and suffering in a way that had some discernable purpose, according to some discernable plan (more will be said below about how “discernable” we should expect such a plan to be). It is somewhat surprising, if theism is true, that suffering seems to come at random.

So it seems a good *prima facie* case can be made for the explanatory claim. Next, why might one think the simplicity claim is true? Again there seems to be a natural way to understand the simplicity claim to be true. For a natural way to think about simplicity is in terms of content. The Naturalist believes in nature, with its pattern of suffering (we can safely set aside worries about abstract objects like numbers and such). The theist believes in that plus the addition of a God outside of nature who has an indiscernible plan for suffering. There’s just “more stuff” in the theist’s understanding of existence than in the Naturalist’s. The principle of parsimony—do not multiply entities without necessity—seems to favor naturalism. We can translate the simplicity claim into a content claim to arrive at this revised and more revealing version of the anti-theistic explanatory argument from evil.

Version B

Expectation claim: Naturalism leads one to expect the pattern of suffering in the world more so than theism.

Content claim: Naturalism is committed to less content than theism.

Version B is *prima facie* plausible. If it is correct, then it seems that—with regard to the evidence of evil—naturalism is the better explanation. If the theist would retain her rational belief in God, there would have to be some kind of basic or inferential epistemic support for it. Those topics are covered in other chapters of this volume.

As we mentioned, the expectation claim will be challenged below, but we will just mention one objection to the content claim here. What seems to matter in assessing the content/simplicity of a view is *not* the quantity of total entities included, but, rather, the quantity of basic entities, for the existence of some entities comes from or can be

derived from that of others.

But theism only postulates a single basic entity: God. All other entities arise from their being seen by God as worth creating. In sharp contrast to this, unless there is a Grand Unified Theory of Physics which can pack all the parameters of a universe into a singularity (and perhaps even then there is a further problem, since a “singularity” in the physical sense still might have parts), naturalism will have to postulate a number of basic entities, perhaps even an extremely large number of them (even if only of a few kinds). Thus the theist would advance the following thesis.

Basic content claim: Theism postulates less basic content than naturalism.

This also has *prima facie* plausibility, so we see that the success of IBE arguments will depend on how one characterizes the theoretical virtues in question.

Theistic Arguments from Evil

As noted in the introduction, one might be surprised to think that evil could be used as a starting point for reasoning to God’s existence. However, there are several considerations about evil that seem to point in the direction of God. The considerations concern the nature of good and evil and the relationships between them. In what follows, we briefly canvass some of these considerations.

The Problem of Good/The Existence of Morality: Law Version

The first consideration is the very existence of morality. In the great Russian novel, *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, the character Ivan says, “If God does not exist, then everything is permissible.” What might he have meant by this? One idea is that if the world is just the result of chance, then why should there be any moral fact of the matter about what is good and what is evil? If the anti-theistic argument from evil is going to get any purchase, there must really be some things that are evil. But if evil is real, then so is good. That is, if some things are really evil, some things are really good. But this fact is hard to explain given naturalism.

Sometimes this kind of argument is given the following form.

1. If there is a moral law, then there must be a moral Law Giver.
2. There is a moral law.
3. Therefore there is a moral Law Giver.

The concept of moral law at play here implies a set of facts about what is good and what is evil. And the idea is that for the anti-theistic argument of evil to get going, there must be such facts.

This argument leaves many details unspecified. First, the notion of moral law is problematic. The Dostoyevskian intuition is more about what it is right and wrong for people to do. But it is unclear how this relates to the notion of good and evil, especially in relation to natural events such as earthquakes and tsunamis.

The notion of a moral Law Giver is also problematic. It suggests a view called “voluntarism” which says that God can just declare something good or bad and it becomes so. But that does not seem right. It doesn’t seem right that God could declare genocide, as

such, good and make it so. There are many versions of a view called “Divine Command Theory” some of which are voluntaristic and others of which are not clearly so. (For a defense of a Divine Command Theory that includes some elements of voluntarism, see Baggett and Walls 2011.)

Moral Worth Version

A more promising approach concerns the notion of moral worth. The idea behind this version of the Problem of Good is that for the anti-theistic argument from evil to do much, it must assume that people have moral worth. People must be moral ends and thus have rights and deserve things. Only if a person has moral worth can it be a bad thing if he or she suffers.

Yet how can persons have moral worth if naturalism is true? If persons are, as Bertrand Russell so eloquently put it “but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms” then it is hard to see from where they derive moral worth (Russell 1957: 107).

Yet it seems easy to see how persons derive moral worth from being made in the image of God. If persons are the result, not of accidental collocations of atoms, but of a plan with a point in which they are appointed guardians over the earth, it is not hard to see how they have moral worth.

An objection to this argument is that if there were no God but humans were still constituted as if they were made in His image, they would still have the same moral worth. So suppose, strange as it might be, that a being springs into existence out of the swamp—call him Swampman—who has hopes and fears, beliefs and desires, and all the exact same functionality as a human, only he did not come from any human, he was just an accident. Wouldn’t Swampman have moral worth? Surely he could not just be killed for no reason or tortured. Swampman seems to have moral standing that is a kind of moral worth. Perhaps this is logically or metaphysically impossible. It seems it would need to be for the argument from moral worth to work. Otherwise the Naturalist could say that humans could have moral worth even in a universe with no God. (For more on this, see Baggett and Walls 2011: 98–101, 199–206.)

Moral Knowledge

More plausible yet is the argument from moral knowledge. The idea behind this argument is that the individual who advances the anti-theistic argument from evil clearly claims moral knowledge. For the argument to be very strong, the premises must be known. But one of the premises is that there is evil. This premise is supposed to be verified by the knowledge that there are many, many instances of evil: that this is evil and that is evil and that is evil. Yet how can the Naturalist explain how we have this moral knowledge? The argument in this version of the Problem of the Good is not from the existence of good, but, rather, from our knowledge of it.

Moral knowledge seems very hard to explain if naturalism is true. If naturalism is true, then it is hard to see how we could have any knowledge that was not crudely sensory. *A priori* knowledge has never sat well with naturalism, and moral knowledge is a very special category of *a priori* knowledge. If, for example, moral knowledge is acquaintance with moral properties, then it is hard to explain how we have it given naturalism. For it is hard to understand how moral properties would enter into causal relations with developing organisms.

Naturalism sits best with naturalized epistemology, which sees epistemology as continuous with science. But it is doubtful that science can tell us which things are good and which are evil. It seems very, very dubious that ethics is a branch, ultimately, of physics (or even something that emerges from it as chemistry and biology are sometimes thought to do). These are unresolved questions in the research project of naturalized epistemology that philosophers are currently debating.

But it is easy to see how we could have moral knowledge if theism is true. For if theism is true, we can be put into contact with the appropriate domain by God. It would be easy for God to establish bridge laws whereby we can come to see moral truths in virtue of empirical knowledge. For example, when watching a man beat a horse for no good reason God could cause us to believe that it is morally wrong by giving us the relevant kind of insight. This would be “hard wired” in such a way that whenever we had the relevant kind of experiences under the right circumstances we would also have the appropriate beliefs. This is not so different from a traditional view called the “doctrine of divine illumination” taught by Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas.

The Experience of the Beauty of the World

Briefly, one other version of a theistic argument from evil is worth considering. The problem of evil is not often put in argumentative form in terms of ugliness, but if, as is plausibly the case, ugliness were a type of evil, then there could be such an argument. One reason why this is so is that the natural world is, almost without exception, beautiful. But in human suffering there is something not just seemingly morally wrong, there is something ugly. The ugliness goes beyond the wrongness and is its own additional evil. But, as with the other cases of evil grounding anti-theistic arguments, there is a theistic argument grounded in the opposite phenomenon. And here, the counterbalancing phenomenon is the sense of beauty we sometimes glimpse in times with friends and family or other social settings. Reasoning similar to the above suggests that this phenomenon favors theism.

The Goods that Evil Entails

Consider the following sentence:

“Sir Edmund Hillary was the first man to climb Mount Everest.”

The truth of this sentence entails many other things which are assumptions within it. For example, it implies that there is a mountain named “Everest,” that there was a man named “Hillary,” that no one climbed Everest before Hillary, and much more. Because these are assumptions of the assertion, if any of them were improbable, the assertion would be improbable as well. A person attempting to give an account of the assertion would be responsible for accounting for its preconditions as well.

Now consider the following assertion.

“There is unjustified suffering in the world.”

This sentence also has many preconditions and implications. Just as with the first assertion, one attempting to account for its truth must also account for the truth of its

preconditions. That assertion is the main premise of the “evidential” argument from evil. We will now look at some of the preconditions of the truth of this assertion. As it turns out, several of them play into traditional arguments for the existence of God, so that, interestingly, this anti-theistic argument sets up several theistic arguments.

Existence

First, note that the first two words of the assertion—“there is”—imply (in this context) that some concrete, contingent things exist. The brilliant early modern philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz in an essay “On the Ultimate Origination of Things” asks us to consider why the things that exist do (see [Chapter 10](#) “Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Intellectual Life”). The question is twofold: Why do those things exist at all, when they might not have? And why do those things exist rather than some other combination of things? There must be some explanation of this or, ultimately, nothing is explicable. But the only thing that could explain the existence of contingent beings is a necessary being, so there must be a necessary being. This is a form of the cosmological argument and it starts from one of the implications of the key premise in the most popular version of the problem of evil.

Complexity and Order

The last term in the assertion—“the world”—presumes not just the bare existence of some contingent, concrete entities, but, more, that these entities are so related to one another in a complex whole that people can predictably affect one another. That is, there is a “world” in the sense of a “cosmos,” an ordered whole which we inhabit. Such a world is a precondition of moral agency, since one must have stable natural laws to act predictably.

But the existence of an orderly universe such as ours has long been considered key evidence for God. Ancient philosophers Plato and Aristotle both had arguments for the existence of God from the existence of an orderly universe, and this evidence has been a mainstay for arguments put forth by philosophers from Saint Thomas Aquinas to Richard Swinburne. So, again, a precondition of the main premise of the anti-theistic argument from evil turns out to be key evidence for God’s existence.

Consciousness

At the center (both literally and figuratively) of the main premise of the anti-theistic argument from evil is the term “suffering.” What is suffering? What does it imply? What are its preconditions? For our purposes, the key fact is that much suffering (perhaps all) implies consciousness. But the problem of consciousness is one of the hardest problems naturalists face. In recent times, some naturalists have even admitted that there does not appear to be any way to solve the problem. In response to this dilemma, one naturalist has called his approach “antecedent physicalism” and compared it with fideistic religious faith (see [Chapter 13](#) “Evidence”).

And it seems that there is no way, even in principle, science could advance in this domain. Certainly, scientists can learn more about the physical processes in which consciousness is realized. However, consciousness itself is simply not a thing, not a part of the brain, or even anything like an electrical or gravitational field emanating from the

brain. The light from a light bulb consists in photons of light. But the feeling of pain doesn't seem to be anything like a photon. It doesn't seem to be any kind of physical thing. Richard Swinburne has pressed this argument in detail. It is very telling that right at the heart of the problem of evil—the suffering of pain or the awareness of loss—is a phenomenon that has been the greatest thorn in the naturalist's side.

The Evils that Good Entails

The considerations in this section differ subtly from those of the last. In that section, the key fact was that the very statement of the problem of evil made crucial reference to facts that seem to support belief in the existence of God. The key fact in this section is that, upon reflection, the kind of suffering we see in this world is, to a surprising extent, just what we should expect given God's existence. Put another way, the kind of suffering in the world is less surprising given theism than naturalism, even if it remains, to some extent, surprising given theism. This line of thought is pursued by John Hick and Richard Swinburne and it challenges the anti-theistic explanatory argument from evil considered above. It does so by arguing that the explanatory claim made there is false. It goes further and claims that the opposite is true.

There are some kinds of goods, which, by their very nature, entail certain kinds of evils. Consider the virtues. According to the Judeo-Christian tradition, a large part of the purpose of creation is to make virtuous individuals. This is to be understood not just in a negative sense as individuals who refrain from doing wrong, but in a strong, positive sense. That is, it is part and parcel of the Judeo-Christian tradition that God's purpose for humans is to develop and display the virtues of courage, moderation, prudence, justice, wisdom, magnanimity, generosity, humility, and, above all, forgiveness.

But note that the exemplification of any of these virtues requires, logically requires, the existence of some kind of state which, all by itself, would be evil. We cannot develop the habit of forgiveness if there is nothing to forgive. We cannot resist temptation unless we are tempted. Prudence is meaningless without the possibility of harm coming through imprudence.

Note further the social virtues, which, according to the Judeo-Christian tradition, God has created us for. We are expected to help one another out in times of need, to "bear one another's burdens." We are called to do this not only in our private lives, but to strive for justice as an organic unity in the social organ we call government.

Here is the really striking thing. We take for granted all the structures and conditions required for suffering to take place in an environment where these virtues can be exercised. There are ever so many ways the world could have turned out in which there was just as much suffering, but no ability to develop the virtues. It is not even clear that a universe with no suffering and no virtue would be better than a universe, like ours, with both. The virtues not only seem to outweigh pain in terms of value, they also seem, especially in the case of forgiveness, to defeat evil in that forgiveness robs evil of its power, and weaves it into a story in which it's an integral part of a whole that is beautiful.

Theists typically believe that this ultimate good will only come to consummation in an afterlife that would qualify as some version of Heaven. Of course, the flip side of this ultimate good that theism gives us reason to hope for is that some persons might reject the ultimate good and end up in a state of damnation. The notion of damnation is a form of evil that is distinctive to theism, so it must be admitted that theism makes

possible evil of a larger and more cosmic significance, just as it warrants goods that are higher and more valuable than anything naturalism can supply. Again, the possibility of this evil is the flip side of the great goods that theism makes possible (see Walls 1992; Kvanvig 1993).

So we seem to be living in a “moral Goldilocks” region between two extremes equally probable given naturalism, which we have reason to think God would prefer. That is, on the one side is a universe with no suffering, but also with no virtue, a world in which its “spoiled” denizens float about from pleasure to pleasure (or feel nothing at all). On the other side is a universe where there is the same amount of pain and suffering, but where we can do nothing to help one another, learn from evil, or conquer it. The world contains many evils which remain unaddressed at this time. There are many diseases for which we have not yet found a cure. But we wage war, as it were, on evil, and there is great good in that. Existing somewhere in this sweet spot is less surprising given theism than given naturalism, for we have reason to think that God would find significant value in such a world. Space limitations preclude further development of this neglected line of thought. Further consideration is warranted.

God, Evil and Cognitive Limitations

In the last two sections, we have considered both the goods that evil entails and the evils that good entails. But, in the end, we surely cannot expect to have anything like exhaustive knowledge of what those entailments are (see Bergmann 2009 for a stronger version of this point). At any given moment, all the relations between events in the world are vastly beyond our comprehension. This seems to limit the amount of credence we can give arguments from evil, for it seems that even if there were reasons for each and every evil, we could not expect to understand them. A common analogy involves a master chess player. For most of us, if we saw a master chess player make a move that seemed to us to seriously jeopardize her position, we would be very unlikely to draw the conclusion the chess master made a mistake. For we could not expect to be able to tell the difference between when the chess master made a mistake and when she made a bold but brilliant move. (Several of the essays in Howard-Snyder 1996 address this line of thought, both pro and con.)

Conclusion

In the introduction to this chapter, we noted that the problem of evil owes both its celebrity and its fascination to classical theism. Indeed, in some sense, it is most fitting to say, “Thank God for the Problem of Evil.” It is precisely because of beliefs about God and his nature as a perfectly powerful and good being that evil is seen as a problem in the deep and perplexing sense that it often is, rather than as something merely normal or inevitable. In other words, it is arguably a profound advantage of a worldview if it sees evil as a *problem* in the profound sense that it is for classical theism.

As our chapter suggests, theism is a two-edged sword when it comes to evil, for it is precisely those very attributes of God that bring the problem most sharply into focus that are also our best hope that evil can be defeated and overcome. If there is a God as classical theism believes, then there is good reason to believe that death and disintegration are not the last word, and that the suffering and injustices of this world will be rectified in the end. And as we have just seen, some of the essential components that

generate the problem of evil are, paradoxically, also fodder for some of the most powerful arguments for God's existence.

In view of this, it is no surprise that there seemed to be no clear victory either for the anti-theistic nor the theistic argument from evil in this exercise in philosophical judo. What seems quite clear, however, is that the study of evil leads to a better understanding of theism just as surely as theism sheds light on the nature of evil.

Related Topics

Chapter 13: Evidence; Chapter 14: Naturalism; Chapter 25: Moral Inquiry; Chapter 30: Arguments About Human Persons; Chapter 49: History and Experience

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Recommended Reading

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- Dougherty, T. (2011) "Recent Work on the Problem of Evil," *Analysis Reviews* 71: 560–73. A critical discussion of work on the problem of evil in the past decade.
- Hasker, W. (2008) *The Triumph of God Over Evil: Theodicy for a World of Suffering*, Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic. A sensitive discussion of the problem of evil that addresses issues raised by evolution.
- Lewis, C. S. (2001) *The Problem of Pain*, San Francisco, CA: Harper. A classic, and highly readable discussion of the problem of evil.
- McBrayer, J. (2009) "CORNEA and Inductive Evidence," *Faith and Philosophy* 26: 77–86. A good, thorough survey of the literature on skeptical theism.
- Stump, E. (2010) *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. A massive but readable volume that explores the problem of evil in light of biblical narrative.
- Swinburne, R. (1998) *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, Oxford: Clarendon Press. A discussion that emphasizes that we must consider God's ultimate purposes in order to make sense of evil.
- Tallon, P. (2011) *The Poetics of Evil: Toward an Aesthetic Theodicy*, New York: Oxford University Press. A helpful assessment of classic and recent proposals to deploy aesthetic resources in addressing the problem of evil.

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Kai-man Kwan

God is not just a hypothesis for the religiously devoted. He is a Living Reality who permeates every aspect of their lives. Religious experiences sometimes convey such a heightened sense of reality that the conviction they instill transforms the lives of the experiencers. Furthermore, religious experiences are often world-transforming as well—just contemplate the immense impact of people like Moses, St Paul, Augustine, William Wilberforce, and their ilk on Western civilization. But are these religious experiences trustworthy?

The argument from religious experience (hereafter ARE) contends that given the appropriate premises, we can derive from the religious experiences (abbreviated as REs) of humankind a significant degree of epistemic justification for the existence of God. In this essay, I will explore both theistic and non-theistic forms of ARE. Some clarification of terms is needed. By a *religious experience* I mean an experience which the subject takes to be an experience of God, or some supernatural being or state of affairs. (By “God” I roughly mean the supremely perfect being who is all-powerful, all-loving and the personal ground of being.) Such an experience is *veridical* if what the subject took to be the object of his experience actually existed, was present, and caused him to have that experience in an appropriate way. The claim that “S has an experience of God” does not entail “God exists.” So the fact that religious experiences have happened does not prejudge the issue of the existence of God.

Contemporary Resurgence of the Argument from Religious Experience

The ARE has been relatively neglected by analytic philosophers. However, starting from the end of the 1970s, a number of them have produced increasingly sophisticated defenses of religious experience. Richard Swinburne (1979: chapter 13) defended religious experience via his Principle of Credulity (hereafter PC), which said that it was rational to treat our experiences as innocent until proven guilty. In other words, religious experiences should be treated as *prima facie* evidence for the existence of God until there were reasons for doubting them. This attracted a lot of attention in philosophy of religion. There were, of course, many critics, for example, William Rowe (1982) and Michael Martin (1990), but Swinburne also inspired the support of quite a few professional philosophers, for instance, Gary Gutting.

Many books were written on religious experience which basically followed Swinburne’s line of reasoning: for example, Caroline Davis (1989), George Wall (1995) and Jerome Gellman (1997). Other philosophers worked independently towards a

similar conclusion, for example, William Wainwright (1981) and Keith Yandell (1993). One landmark of this debate is William Alston's *Perceiving God* (1991), which skillfully defended a doxastic practice approach to epistemology. This approach said that it was practically rational to have a *prima facie* trust in our socially established doxastic practices, including the Christian Mystical Practice. His arguments were widely discussed and taken seriously.

Defenders of the ARE made considerable progress in the later part of the twentieth century. When Swinburne first propounded his ARE in the late 1970s, he was greeted with incredulity (see Hesse 1981: 288). Nowadays, even critics among professional philosophers of religion treat the ARE with some respect. It is now regularly discussed in texts on philosophy of religion, and I think it is going to become one of the classical arguments for God. The old defenders continue to update their case (Gellman 2001; Hick 2006; Yandell 1999), and it has also drawn new supporters such as T. J. Mawson (2005), Stephen Layman (2007), Douglas Geivett (2003), Stephen Evans and Zachary Manis (2009).

Another interesting development is the "coming out" of a trio of critical realists in support of the ARE (Archer et al. 2004). It is remarkable that besides a philosopher (Andrew Collier), the trio also consists of two sociologists (Margaret Archer and Douglas Porpora). It is rather unusual for sociologists working in a secular environment to defend religious experience. A well-known epistemologist Robert Audi is also a qualified supporter of ARE. Although he does not have an explicitly affirmative conclusion, in the end he allows that direct theistic knowledge is possible, and could provide substantial justification for religious belief (Audi 1998: 270, 274, 276). Besides analytic philosophers, some scholars who have adopted a phenomenological approach also defend RE, for example, Anthony Steinbock (2007) and Wessel Stoker (2006).

The critical evaluation of the ARE often goes hand in hand with the rethinking of epistemology. While the major critics of ARE often have sympathy for a more restrictive type of empiricism or foundationalism (Keith Parsons 1989), many defenders of ARE challenge foundationalist epistemology. For example, Grahame Miles' (2007) defense of ARE is based on his attempt to articulate a new epistemological framework which can integrate science and religion. Paul Moser's Volitional Theism argues that we need to drastically rethink the way we regard evidence for God, if God is really there. He makes a distinction between spectator knowledge (which does not challenge the human will) and authoritative knowledge (which does). Since God's purpose is to transform inquirers and to free them from selfishness, we should expect authoritative evidence rather than spectator evidence (Moser 2010: 42). If we respond to God's authoritative call to let ourselves be transformed by God, then our transformed personal lives will "*themselves* become evidence of God" (Moser 2010: 172).

Stephen Evans argues that we can have an experience of God mediated by natural signs (such as sense of cosmic wonder or a sense of moral obligation). This kind of mediated experience of God is modeled on the Reidian account of perception: "sensations are not the primary objects of perceptual awareness but are 'natural signs' that make perceptual awareness [of external objects] possible" (Evans 2010: 29). The old empiricists pit cognition against participation because they believe personal involvement is inimical to the impassionate search for truth. In contrast, John Cottingham defends and applies a praxis-based approach to knowing (or *participatory knowing*) to RE. He contends that in many cases of knowing, especially in more human forms of experience, proper knowing is founded on the right kind of personal involvement and inner reflection, and

not on detached logical analysis. For example, he draws on Martha Nussbaum's idea of Love's Knowledge (1990) which provides a "radical critique of the traditional rigid dichotomy between the supposedly antithetical faculties of reason and the passions. . . . [T]here are certain kinds of truth such that to try to grasp them purely intellectually is to avoid them" (Cottingham 2005: 10). He suggests as an example knowledge about love affairs. Similarly, a participatory knowing of God is a coherent possibility.

Of course, the ARE also has able detractors (Richard Gale 1991; Matthew Bagger 1999; Nicholas Everitt 2002; James Harris 2004). No consensus exists yet, but the ARE seems to be alive and well. The recent developments reviewed above show that the ARE has been picking up momentum from the late twentieth century to the early twenty-first century. Many scholars (not only from philosophy) now join force in defending some form of ARE.

Three Major Forms of Argument from Religious Experience

There are different forms of ARE. Readers should note that from now on Swinburne's Principle of Credulity (PC) will be renamed Principle of Critical Trust (PCT), and the kind of epistemology which takes PCT as a fundamental principle is called the Critical Trust Approach (CTA). I am glad that my terminology is at least accepted by John Hick: "The term 'the critical trust approach' has been introduced by Kai-man Kwan (2003), and I use it in preference to the earlier 'principle of credulity' . . . and my own 'principle of rational credulity'" (Hick 2006: 210). The ARE which is based on the PCT can be called a Transcendental ARE. This can be formulated as below:

- TA1) Any justification from experience is possible only when the PCT is *presupposed*.
- TA2) Hence the PCT should be applied to all kinds of experience.
- TA3) Hence the PCT should be applied to RE, i.e., RE should be trusted until it is defeated by special considerations.
- TA4) Not all REs have been defeated, i.e., shown to be delusory.
- TA5) Therefore, it is *ultima facie* justified to believe in the veridicality of *some* REs.

In contrast, the Analogical ARE argues to the same conclusion using the analogy of RE with other commonly accepted types of experiences as a premise. Past discussions of the Analogical ARE have focused on the comparison of sense experience with RE. I think these discussions are worthwhile but there are other fruitful ways to develop an Analogical ARE. For example, Garth Hallett has devoted a whole book to defending an Analogical ARE by comparing an interpersonal experience about a mother's love for her child to theistic experience (hereafter TE). The conclusion is that since his belief that this mother loves her child is rational, belief in God should also be deemed rational (Hallett 2000: 19–20).

The Explanatory ARE takes REs as data, and then uses the inference to the best explanation (IBE) to support a religious worldview. Explanatory AREs are not the most popular form among contemporary defenders of REs. However, I think Philip Wiebe's impressive efforts have revived the prospect of Explanatory ARE. The data he appeals to are the Christic visions (Wiebe 1997) and experiences of exorcism (Wiebe 2004). Methodologically speaking, Wiebe is more akin to the "tough-minded" empiricist. He has reservations about PCT, insisting on the guidance of more public experiences. Most

people who adopt this approach will *assume* that REs can be easily explained naturalistically but Wiebe proceeds to study the empirical data in detail, and comes to a surprising conclusion. Wiebe has collected many accounts of contemporary visions of Christ. He then tests various naturalistic and mentalistic explanations against the empirical data, and finds them inadequate. So he concludes, the “claim that the transcendent is encountered in common experiences seems to me plausible primarily because of uncommon phenomena suggestive of transcendence” (Wiebe 1997: 215). Later, Wiebe extends the same procedure to the study of the experiences of exorcism and evil spirits. His conclusion is that “the evidence that is available suggests that the conjecture that evil spirits exist has some plausibility” (Wiebe 2004: 58).

Another defense of an Explanatory ARE is found in Irving Block (2007). He mainly defends the validity of near-death experiences (NDEs) and uses them as a confirmation of Jewish mysticism. For him “NDEs confirm . . . the ultimate truth of mysticism: everything is one and nothing exists outside this oneness. It is bonded by love and behind it all is what we call” God (Block 2007: 134). He does not appeal to the PCT but provides explanatory considerations which support the objectivity of NDEs. For example, he cites the case of a seventy-year-old woman who had been blind since the age of eighteen but “was able to describe in vivid detail what was happening around her as doctors resuscitated her after a heart attack. . . . [S]he could even describe their [the instruments’] colors. . . . [M]ost of these instruments weren’t even thought of over fifty years ago when she could last see” (Block 2007: 140). His conclusion is that it is not only rational to accept the truth of NDEs, but actually irrational not to accept them in the light of all the evidence.

It is important to distinguish different forms of ARE because some considerations (positive or negative) might be relevant for one form but not the others. I think all three forms of AREs can be used in a mutually complementary fashion but my main focus here is on the Transcendental ARE.

The Rationale for the Principle of Critical Trust

One crucial premise of the Transcendental ARE is the PCT. Why should one accept such a principle which, according to many critics, seems to lead to the opening of the floodgates of superstition and irrationality? Of course, beginning with Descartes’ quest for certainty, many philosophers have assumed that the road to truth depends on the acceptance of a principle of doubt: we need to doubt everything that can be doubted until we find an indubitable foundation upon which the human cognitive edifice can be securely built. However, what are the consequences of this kind of epistemology? Mawson asks us to seriously entertain the following principle, which is exactly the opposite of the PCT:

If it seems to a subject that something is the case, then it is reasonable for him or her to believe that it really is the case if and only if he or she has a deductive argument showing that there’s no way that he or she could be deceived, an argument that starts from indubitable premises and employs reasoning that not even an all-powerful demon could be confusing that subject about.

(Mawson 2005: 165)

Isn’t it very likely, or even unavoidable, that following this principle would lead to global skepticism?

As a matter of fact, our ordinary belief-forming processes (including sense experience and memory) can be doubted. So how can we show them to be reliable? Alston answers:

The most direct approach would be to compare its output beliefs with the facts that make them true or false, and determine the track record of the practice in a suitable spread of cases. Sometimes this is possible. It is possible, e.g., when we are dealing with what we might call “partial” or “restricted” practices, like determining temperature on the basis of mercury thermometers . . . In these cases we have other modes of access to the facts in question, modes which we can use to check the accuracy of the practice under examination. But we fairly quickly arrive at more inclusive practices where this technique is no longer available. If we are assessing SP (i.e., sensory practice) in general, e.g., we have no independent access to the facts in question . . . , i.e., no access that neither consists in nor is based on reliance on sense perception; and so we have no non-circular check on the accuracy of the deliverances of SP.

(Alston 1988: 436)

In short, we can only check the reliability of some sense experiences by presupposing the reliability of other sense experiences. The PCT seems to be inescapable.

The second problem is pointed out sharply by Swinburne in the following passage:

[A]n induction from past experiences to future experiences is only reliable if we correctly recall our past experiences. And what grounds have we got for supposing that we do? Clearly not inductive grounds—an inductive justification of the reliability of memory-claims would obviously be circular. Here we must rely on the principle that things are the way they seem, as a basic principle not further justifiable. . . . The principle that the rational man supposes that in the absence of special considerations in particular cases things are the way they seem to be cannot always be given inductive justification. And if it is justifiable to use it when other justifications fail in memory cases, what good argument can be given against using it in other kinds of case when other justifications fail?

(Swinburne 1979: 256)

So, in the end, to “justify” ordinary perception inductively, we have to rely on the *prima facie* reliability of memory. Again we need to appeal to the PCT as a fundamental principle.

If the above arguments are correct, we cannot provide any non-circular proof for any of our socially established doxastic practices but “we can’t move a step without trusting the deliverances of one or more of these sources” (Alston 1993: 124). How should we proceed then? There are basically three options:

- a. *prima facie acceptance* of the doxastic practices;
- b. *suspend* our acceptance of the doxastic practices;
- c. *replace* the current doxastic practices with some others.

Alston argues that it is “eminently *reasonable* for us to form beliefs in the ways we standardly do . . . [and it is] eminently reasonable for us to go along with our very strong,

and perhaps even irresistible, inclination to form beliefs in these ways” (Alston 1993: 126). If this is true, then the suspension option (b) is either impossible or extremely costly. This point is especially weighty given Alston’s opinion that many of our beliefs are just involuntary: we just “cannot help . . . believe many other things” (Alston 1993: 127). So the acceptance option (a) is in, and (b) out.

Furthermore:

If we could adopt some basic way of forming beliefs about the physical environment other than SP [sensory practice], or some basic way of forming beliefs about the past other than memory, . . . why should we? . . . It is not as if we would be in a better position to provide an epistemically non-circular support for the reliability of these newcomers.

(Alston 1993: 125)

The point is that the replacement option (c) cannot put us in a better epistemic situation, and of course it involves further costs. So (c) is inferior to (a). The conclusion is that there is no “reasonable alternative to practicing the ones with which we are intimately familiar” (Alston 1993: 126) from the viewpoint of practical rationality. Alston is aware of the possibility to “take our stand on one or more of these [doxastic practices], and hold the others subject to judgment on that basis,” but he argues that this approach is “vulnerable to a charge of *undue partiality* in taking some of our firmly established doxastic practices for granted and requiring vindication of the others in the light of the former” (Alston 1993: 126; *italics mine*).

The defense of the PCT (or Alston’s doxastic practice approach) will inevitably raise many deep epistemological questions. The controversy is still raging. However, it seems that Alston’s elaborate defense of his doxastic practice approach has convinced a significant number of philosophers that this new kind of epistemology is at least viable. I have also provided an extended argument for the PCT and CTA (Kwan 2011: Part A).

The Decline of Traditional Foundationalism and Stock Objections to Religious Experience

Traditional foundationalists are motivated by the quest for some indubitable foundation (the given) which is free from interpretation, and/or open to public confirmation. Although this foundationalist quest has already been widely regarded as mistaken, many objections to religious experience still reflect this longing. The ARE is usually dismissed on the basis of stock objections such as the following:

(1) *The Logical Gap Objection*: We have to distinguish the experience and the subjective conviction it produces from the objectivity (or *veridicality*) of the experience, e.g., a very “real” hallucination or dream is a live possibility. Critics such as Antony Flew admit that religious experiences often produce subjective certitude. However, there is a logical gap between the psychological data and the ontological claim of the religious experiences. To bridge the gap, we need independent certification of the religious belief. For example, Flew challenges the defenders of religious experiences to answer this basic question: “How and when would we be justified in making inferences from the facts of the occurrence of religious experience, considered as a purely psychologi-

cal phenomenon, to conclusions about the supposed objective religious truths?" (Flew 1966: 129).

(2) *The Theory-ladenness Objection*: Religious experiences are heavily (or even entirely) shaped by the conceptual framework of the experiencers. Hence they are not useful as evidence for ontological claims. Indeed, a recent critic, Graham Oppy, thinks that since "cases of revelation and selective ('private') religious experiences" are "rarely reported by those who are not already religious believers—or by those who are not embedded in a community in which there is considerable religious fervour, . . . there are good reasons for non-believers to suspect that there is pollution by prior theory in these cases as well" (Oppy 2006: 350, note 4).

Concerning the Logical Gap Objection, many theists have already provided reasonable responses. First, we should note that the objection basically conforms to the structure of the general skeptical argument. This can be seen from Gutting's parody of Flew's question:

How and when would we be justified in making inferences from the facts of the occurrence of experiences of material objects, considered as a purely psychological phenomenon, to conclusions about the supposed objective truths about material objects?

(Gutting 1982: 147)

The certitude/certainty distinction applies to almost all kinds of experience. A hallucination is exactly an unveridical sense experience which nevertheless produces subjective conviction. If the certitude/certainty distinction *in itself* threatens religious experiences, it will also threaten sense experience. Why, then, is the logical gap not damaging in other cases? If the critics only apply the objection to religious experiences but not to other experiences, it would be extremely arbitrary.

The Theory-ladenness Objection again raises a general problem in epistemology. Even ordinary perception is theory-laden and a similar problem plagues scientific realism. The positivists have searched strenuously for the rock-bottom "given" which is interpretation-free. In this way, it can serve as the neutral arbiter of different theories or interpretations. However, the development of modern philosophy and especially contemporary philosophy of science bespeak the downfall of this project. All the major philosophers of science, such as Popper, Hanson, Kuhn, Lakatos and Feyerabend, agree that all observations are to some extent theory-laden. For example, Nancy Cartwright writes:

We can be mistaken about even the most mundane claims about sensible properties, and . . . their defense will rest on a complicated and sophisticated network of general claims about how sensations are caused, what kinds of things can go wrong in the process, and what kinds of things can and cannot be legitimately adduced as inferences.

(Cartwright 1993: 259)

It is now widely recognized that modern psychology confirms the idea that interpretation

is absolutely essential to there occurring a perceptual experience at all. . . . We are not passive recipients of ready-made representations of our environment; rather, stimuli from that environment must be processed by various interpretive mechanisms before they can have any significance for us.

(Davis 1989: 149)

Ralph Baergen, after surveying the empirical studies, concludes that “psychological evidence shows that the operation of the human visual system certainly is influenced by beliefs, assumptions, expectations, and so on.” Moreover, “the processing involved is, to some extent, top-down. . . . [O]ur beliefs, expectations, and so on influence our visual presentations, and not merely their interpretation” (Baergen 1993: 16).

That means even our sensations are “polluted.” Let us examine Oppy’s claim that in the case of religious experiences, there is likely to be “pollution by prior theory.” This allegation at least involves two claims. First, believers’ prior theory has significant influence on the content of their RE. Second, this influence tends to “pollute” the experience, rendering it unveridical. The former claim is not implausible in light of the above considerations. However, there is also substantial evidence that prior theory does not *entirely* determine the content of TE (theistic experience):

[M]any people have experiences which are highly individualistic. . . . [S]ome . . . feel the arms of God wrapped around them; others sense Jesus’ love gradually coming into their body from head to toe or from toe to head; . . . many experience Jesus or God in ways not clearly derived from Scripture or from reports in the church or elsewhere. . . . [A]t one time they have a fairly standard experience of Jesus and at another have an Eastern form of experience (we may think of Joy, who first of all had a Nirvana-type experience, which then developed into an experience in which she felt herself to be a participant with Jesus on the cross, sensing the meaning of his death).

(Wall 1995: 302)

The more important point is that the influence of a prior conceptual framework in experience is not necessarily cognitively debilitating. In fact, after pointing out the top-down way of processing in the human visual system, Baergen goes on to say that it is this aspect “of vision which allow us, for example, to recognize objects under poor viewing conditions or when only a small part of them is visible. . . . [C]ertain forms of agnosia arise when our knowledge about objects is prevented from influencing perceptual processing” (Baergen 1993: 16). In other words, in our common experience, prior theory does not necessarily pollute. It is, in fact, *necessary* for our perception which can effectively reveal the world to us. (Of course, we cannot non-circularly prove this point. What is said above is said within the critical trust framework.)

Perhaps the critic will still insist that the presence of theory deprives RE of independent evidential force. Therefore, the interpretive elements of religious experience have to be independently supported before we can deem the experiences reliable. However, since sense experiences also have interpretive elements,

if we were always required to provide independent evidence that the beliefs in terms of which we had unconsciously “interpreted” a perceptual

experience were probably true before we could take the perceptual experience to be probably veridical, we would be trapped in [skepticism].

(Davis 1989: 144)

If the critic is to avoid the charge of double standard, he needs to explain in what way this is a special problem for religious experiences.

The decline of foundationalism does not mean an automatic victory for the ARE. However, the critics should make sure their case is not based on problematic epistemological positions. Of course, there are still other possible defeaters of RE, for example, the experience of absence of God or the availability of naturalistic explanations of RE. I cannot go into the details of these debates here. Many defenders of ARE have extensively replied to the most common defeaters (Davis 1989; Gellman 1997, 2001; Hick 2006; Kwan 2009; Wall 1995). The acceptability of the ARE depends on the plausibility of these replies.

Theistic Experience and Non-theistic Religious Experience

Since the PCT is a general principle, it can be applied to various types of RE, and not only theistic experience. So there is a problem of conflicting REs. Before dealing with this problem, let us provide a list of the major types of REs:

- A. Theistic experience (TE).
- B. Ecstasy and peak experience (Abraham Maslow).
- C. Encounter of the Light Being in a near-death experience (Moody).
- D. Experience of evil spirit, angels or departed saints.
- E. Experience of contingency—a spontaneous feeling that the world is not ultimate and is somehow dependent on something beyond.
- F. Experience of design—experience of being struck by the beauty and intricacy of the natural order and the feeling that this order is ultimately due to Intelligence or Mind.
- G. Nature mysticism, extrovertive mysticism or cosmic consciousness: a spontaneous feeling that the universe and oneself are one. It is usually induced by contemplation of nature but a similar experience can also be induced by drugs, e.g., mescaline.
- H. Pure consciousness event (PCE): a pure state of consciousness without *any* intentional object and uncontaminated by any concept. This event should be distinguished from the monistic mystical experience which might include a PCE as a part.
- I. Experience of minor deities: e.g., visions of Kali, Buddha or Apollo.
- J. Monistic mysticism: e.g., the intuitive apprehension that Atman is Brahman and that All is One.
- K. Experience of Nirvana: experience of Nothingness or No-self as the Ultimate.

It is important to recognize that although non-theistic REs (simply called non-TEs here) are not specifically theistic, they are not necessarily incompatible with theism. In fact they can be further divided into *theism-compatible non-TEs* and *theism-incompatible non-TEs*. Among the list above, monistic mysticism and the experience of Nirvana are theism-incompatible non-TEs because the Ultimate disclosed in these experiences is not personal. The rest are arguably theism-compatible. PCEs have no propositional

content and hence cannot contradict theism or anything else. Nature mysticism or extrovertive mysticism can be interpreted in either a monistic or theistic way. The kind of unity sensed in nature mysticism can reflect either the unity of all things rooted in their common source—their Creator God—or the kind of metaphysical unity envisaged by monism.

Ecstasy and peak experience suggest a kind of spiritual depth in human beings which is more consonant with theism than with naturalism. Both the Light Being encountered in near-death experiences and various kinds of spirit can exist comfortably within a theistic worldview. The experiences of contingency and design point in the direction of a Transcendent Creator-Designer. If these experiences are veridical, they are not only compatible with theism, but can also offer significant support for theism. Even the experiences of minor deities: such as visions of Kali or Buddha or Apollo are not *directly* incompatible with theism because it is logically possible that both God and these minor deities exist at the same time.

The Conflicting Claims Objection

The major conflict occurs between TE and theism-incompatible non-TE. The most important contradiction concerns the *nature of ultimate reality*. Is it personal or impersonal? Numinous experiences and theistic experiences seem to indicate that it is personal while monistic mystical experiences seem to show it to be impersonal. However, even this contradiction is not entirely irremediable. Suppose the ultimate reality is indeed personal. It is possible that a personal being can manifest himself in a non-personal way. The manifestation can still be veridical. Consider Yahweh's epiphany to Elijah. God can be said to be manifested in the earthquake and the whirlwind but this is not yet a personal manifestation. If the epiphany stops at this level, the experient might even think that God is impersonal. However, the situation is transformed when the "still small voice" is added to the scene. The whole experience becomes an unambiguous personal manifestation. So a non-personal manifestation does not entail that the underlying reality is anti-personal. This is even more plausible when we realize that orthodox theists always maintain that God is more than personal, in other words, that the human category of "personal" can't exhaust the nature of God. Indeed, the Old Testament scholar H. H. Rowley says, "we find *personal and impersonal factors* woven together in what the Hebrews believed to be God's manifestation of himself" (Rowley 1956: 45).

In the end there is a conflict only if one claims that the Ultimate is *essentially personal*, and the other claims that the Ultimate is *essentially impersonal*. However, Wall says, "we rarely, if ever, run across claims to the effect that someone was aware of experiencing God's essential nature or some aspect of God as essential. In all cases I collected or examined I found neither claim made" (Wall 1995: 320). Of course, it can also be maintained that an Impersonal Absolute can manifest itself in personal ways. For example, some schools of Hinduism make the distinction between the *saguna-Brahman* (the personal manifestation of Brahman) and the *nirguna-Brahman* (the Impersonal Absolute and Ultimate). If the above analysis is correct, it means that there is no necessary conflict between the majority of reports of RE which may place the emphasis on either the personal or impersonal aspects of the Ultimate without claiming that the Ultimate is exclusively personal or exclusively impersonal. So it is by no means impossible to organize most of the diverse religious experiences into a coherent framework. Of course

some revisionist moves are inevitable but the CTA does not forbid them, provided the resulting worldview is more coherent.

In line with the above suggestions, although there is a significant degree of conflict between the reports based on religious experiences *at the highest level of description*, a certain common core can still be extracted from them *at a lower level of description*. Caroline Davis suggests the following as the common core:

- (i) the mundane world of physical bodies, physical processes, and narrow centres of consciousness is not the whole or ultimate reality.
- (ii) . . . there is a far deeper “true self” which in some way depends on and participates in the ultimate reality.
- (iii) Whatever is the ultimate reality is holy, eternal, and of supreme value; it can appear to be more truly real than all else, since everything else depends on it.
- (iv) This holy power can be experienced as an awesome, loving, pardoning, guiding (etc.) presence with whom individuals can have a personal relationship . . .
- (v) . . . at least some mystical experiences are experiences of a very intimate union with the holy power . . .
- (vi) Some kind of union or harmonious relation with the ultimate reality is the human being’s *summum bonum*, his final liberation or salvation, and the means by which he discovers his “true self” or “true home.”

(Davis 1989: 191)

All religious experiences point to the fact that there is another realm *up there* or *beyond* the naturalistic world. So even if REs have internal conflicts, arguably they can still lend support to ARE insofar as they tilt the balance away from naturalism. As Mawson says:

The commonalities among people’s religious experiences—and here we must remember to include those of the adherents of religions that do not see the supernatural order as personal—is merely that there is some supernatural realm; that it is not malevolent; and that putting oneself in touch with it is of vital importance. As such, the collective testimony of humanity is not enough to give us positive reason to prefer any one religion over any other. Even then, though, it does give us reason to suppose that physicalism is false.

(Mawson 2005: 178)

Some defenders of ARE are content to stop at this stage. People who strive for a more comprehensive theory include John Hick, who argues that the Ultimate is an ineffable Real, which transcends the personal–impersonal distinction: “in denying that the Real is personal one is not saying that it is impersonal, but rather that the personal–impersonal dualism does not apply here” (Hick 1995: 61). However, both theistic experiences and monistic experiences are still authentic manifestation of the Real from a practical standpoint. Hick believes that his pluralist hypothesis is the best and most comprehensive explanation of all the REs (Hick 1995: 51, 62, 64). In contrast, each of the particularist schools (monistic or theistic) has only taken account of part of the REs, and hence is inferior.

I have argued instead that the theistic particularist position is not inferior to the pluralist solution (Kwan 2003). I further argue that the CTA has rational resources to

resolve the conflict between theism and monism. (For the detailed arguments, see Kwan 2009, 2011.) I can only provide a brief treatment of this problem here. The key point is that the PCT is applicable to various types of experience besides RE, namely, sense experience, moral experience, interpersonal experience and so on. So these kinds of experience also provide presumptive data which can help to arbitrate conflicts between experiences. Let us take the core claims of the Advaita Vedanta school of Hinduism as examples of monistic assertions:

- a. Brahman as the Impersonal Absolute is the Ultimate Reality in which there is no distinction and differentiation.
- b. Atman is Brahman, i.e., every human self is metaphysically identical to Brahman; hence every self is metaphysically identical to another self.
- c. The world is ultimately *maya* (illusion).

Now sense experience apparently discloses a world of multiplicity and change, and this comes into conflict with monism. There is no analogous problem for TE. For example, Gale thinks that concerning monistic experiences, their “descriptions are often contradictory or in conflict with our best-established empirical beliefs, such as that there exists a multiplicity of distinct objects and events in space and time” (Gale 1991: 303). Monism also seems to come in conflict with the basic assumption of moral experience, for example, that there is an objective distinction between good and evil, right and wrong. It is questionable how this can be preserved in a system in which All is One. Does it mean that in the end we can’t distinguish Hitler from Mother Teresa, and Stalin from Gandhi? In contrast, there are impressive arguments to the effect that TE is at least coherent with moral experience (Adams 1999; Wainwright 2005). Moreover, interpersonal experience reveals the otherness of the *Thou*, and the distinctness of different selves. Again this seems to be in conflict with the monistic doctrine that all these distinctions are illusory. If arguments along these lines are plausible, then TE is more coherent with a large body of presumptive data than monistic experience. Within the framework of CTA, this is a good reason to prefer TE to monistic experience.

However, theists do not need to dismiss monistic experience in its entirety. Maritain suggests such an interpretation of monistic experience:

The Hindu experience does appear therefore, to be a mystical experience in the natural order . . . of that absolute which is the substantial *esse* of the soul and, in it and through it, of the divine absolute. And how could this experience, being purely negative, distinguish the one of these absolutes from the other? Inasmuch as it is a purely negative experience, it neither confuses nor distinguishes them. And since no content of the “essential” order, no *quid*, is then attained, it is comprehensible that philosophic thought reflecting upon such an experience inevitably runs the danger of identifying in some measure the one and the other absolute, that absolute which is the mirror and that one which is perceived in the mirror. The same word “atman” will designate the human Self and the supreme Self.

(Maritain 1966: 97–8)

The Advaitin would allow that *bhakti* (devotion) is a legitimate way to Brahman but ultimately, if he is consistent, he must regard a loving devotion to Brahman as based on

ignorance. It is because devotion presupposes some sort of dualism that it conflicts with Advaita's non-dualism. As Ninian Smart explains:

It does seem to me that theism can give us a profound and beautiful way of integrating the insights of prophets with those of contemplatives and combining the paths of devotional worship and mystical endeavour. But if you try to do it the other way round the main teachings of theism begin to disappear: devotion fades and the revelations wither. While theism can convincingly absorb and enrich the mystical path without detriment to the latter, the mystical path cannot absorb theistic belief without relegating it to second place.

(Smart 1960: 72)

If this is the case, then the theistic way of cognitive adjustment preserves more of the *prima facie* evidential force of the data than the monistic way.

Michael Stoeber (1994) has made a notable effort to provide a theistic interpretation of the diverse religious experiences, an integration of monistic and theistic types of mysticism in particular. Stoeber's theory of *theo-monism* "secures a typology of mysticism that authenticates and harmonizes the various mystical experiences." Moreover, he argues that his *theo-monism* is more plausible than Sankara's monistic hierarchy because while "Sankara's monistic hierarchy is unable to affirm or reinforce the authenticity of lower level theistic realizations in terms of higher level monistic realizations," *theo-monism* can provide "a pluralistic framework that secures the authenticity of monistic realizations" (Stoeber 1994: 3–4). If impressive efforts such as Stoeber's are taken into account, the force of the conflicting experiences objection to ARE will be further reduced.

Conclusion

The argument from religious experience, in its various forms, is hotly contended. In this chapter, I have highlighted the crucial issues surrounding this debate, and suggested that Swinburne's Transcendental ARE appears to be a promising one but that this approach depends crucially on the PCT, the further defense of which will inevitably raise many deep epistemological questions. In the end, the epistemic assessment of religious experience will probably depend on the ability of this radically new epistemology to withstand objections. Moreover, the debate around whether there are successful defeaters of RE is ongoing.

One major problem for the Transcendental ARE is the diversity of REs. Since the PCT is applicable to both TE and non-TEs, the conflict between them needs to be dealt with. Hick's pluralism is one way to explain all the data. Alternatively, I suggest that when we take into consideration all the presumptive data in a CTA, the theistic form of ARE might still be defensible.

Related Topics

Chapter 6: Hindu Theism; Chapter 13: Evidence; Chapter 14: Naturalism; Chapter 36: Religious Diversity

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Recommended Reading

- Alston, W. P. (1991) *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*, Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press. The modern classic on ARE which provides a philosophically sophisticated defense of this argument.
- Cottingham, J. (2005) *The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy, and Human Value*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. A rich exploration of the role of religious experience in human existence.
- Davis, C. (1989) *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, Oxford: Clarendon Press. A lucid treatment of the ARE and assessment of various objections, particularly good on naturalistic explanations of religious experience.
- Gellman, J. (2001) *Mystical Experience of God: A Philosophical Inquiry*, Aldershot: Ashgate. A concise and critical assessment of several common objections to the ARE.
- Gutting, G. (1982) *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press. Provides a moderate defense of both religious experience and religious skepticism.
- Hick, J. (2006) *The New Frontier of Religion and Science: Religious Experience, Neuroscience and the Transcendent*, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan. Explores the credibility of religious experience in the light of recent neurophysiological discoveries.
- Kwan, K.-m. (2009) "The Argument from Religious Experience," in W. Craig and J. P. Moreland (eds), *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 498–552. Explores the application of the principle of critical trust to theistic experience and provides an updated defense of the ARE against various objections.
- (2011) *The Rainbow of Experiences, Critical Trust, and God: A Defense of Holistic Empiricism*, New York: Continuum. An epistemological defense of the principle of critical trust relating religious experience to various uniquely human experiences such as moral experience, aesthetic experience, and interpersonal experience.

ARGUMENTS ABOUT HUMAN PERSONS

James Porter Moreland

Dean Zimmerman has reminded us that

when assessing the adequacy of an ethical or epistemological or metaphysical theory, analytic philosophers consider things like this: the theory's ability to retain most, if not all, of their firmest pre-theoretical convictions about the subject matter it purports to describe; [and] the naturalness of the theory's fit with other philosophical views they hold.

(Zimmerman 2007: 11)

Paraphrasing Zimmerman's insight, two features in favor of a philosophical theory are (i) its ability to preserve the belief of folk ontology, the reflective beliefs of common-sense held pervasively by thoughtful people and (ii) the naturalness of its fit with other views, especially philosophical views, held by its advocates.

These two criteria support the existence of the biblical God (and other versions of theism that share its view of human personhood) and are disastrous for scientific naturalism. In Genesis 1:27, we read, "And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female he created them" (NASB). Now, one of the roles of a worldview is to explain facts. It is incumbent on a worldview that it explains what does/does not exist in ways that follow naturally from its core commitments.

In this sense, a worldview is an explanatory hypothesis. From worldview explanations, to scientific theorizing, to explaining things in everyday life, we all engage in "if-then" reasoning, or what philosophers call the Hypothetico-Deductive Method: If the moon were in such and such a place, then the tide would be thus and so. But the tide isn't thus and so, so the moon must not be in that place. And if the facts are as we deduce they should be, given our hypothesis, then this provides confirming evidence that our hypothesis is true. The hypothesis is the best explanation for the facts.

Now, a recalcitrant fact is one that is uncooperative in light of attempts to handle it by some theory. A theory might explain some facts nicely. But a recalcitrant fact resists explanation for a theory. No matter what a theory's advocate does, the recalcitrant fact resists incorporation into the theory and, thereby, provides falsifying evidence for that theory.

One way to “handle” recalcitrant facts is to deny them. Another is to proffer an ad hoc adjustment to one’s theory—an irrational, intellectually unacceptable adjustment of a theory whose sole rationale is to save it from falsifying evidence. As such, an ad hoc adjustment has no other independent reasons that can be offered on its behalf.

As we saw above, the Bible teaches that human beings are made in the image of God. This implies that there are things about our make up that are like God is. Accordingly, Calvin observed: “No man can survey himself without forthwith turning his thoughts towards the God in whom he lives and moves; because it is perfectly obvious, that the endowments which we possess cannot possibly be from ourselves” (Calvin 1536: 1.1.1).

As image-bearers, human beings have all those endowments necessary to re-present God, and to accomplish the tasks and exhibit the relationality placed before them, for example, endowments of reason, self-determination, moral action, personality and relational formation. In this sense, the image of God is straightforwardly ontological. Given the ontological nature of the image of God, this implies that the make up of human beings should provide a set of recalcitrant facts for non-theistic worldviews. The reasoning behind this claim goes like this: If the biblical view of God is true, then certain features should characterize human beings. Those features do, in fact, characterize human beings. Thus, these features provide a degree of confirmation for the biblical view of God. They resemble God and come from Him. The biblical theist offers a challenge to non-theistic worldviews—particularly, scientific naturalism: Show that you have a better explanation for these features than biblical theism does, or show that these features are not actually real, even though they seem to be.

The main version of anti-theism in Western culture is scientific naturalism, and it will be the theistic rival of interest in what follows. The recalcitrant nature of human persons for scientific naturalism has been widely noticed. Thus, John Searle recently noted:

There is exactly one overriding question in contemporary philosophy . . . How do we fit in? . . . How can we square this self-conception of ourselves as mindful, meaning-creating, free, rational, etc., agents with a universe that consists entirely of mindless, meaningless, un-free, non-rational, brute physical particles?

(Searle 2007: 4–5)

For the scientific naturalist, the answer is “not very well.” While Searle is an atheist, he has some pretty harsh things to say about the last fifty years or so of work in the philosophy of mind (Searle 1992: chapters 1 and 2). Specifically, he says that the field has contained numerous assertions that are obviously false (for example, that consciousness isn’t real or that the essence of a pain is not that it hurts!) and has cycled neurotically through various positions precisely because of the dominance of strict physicalism (all properties and individual things are entirely physical) as the only live option for a naturalist.

For Searle, philosophy of mind has been dominated by scientific naturalism for fifty years and scientific naturalists have advanced different versions of strict physicalism, however implausible they might be in light of what is obviously known by us about consciousness, because strict physicalism was seen as a crucial implication of taking the naturalistic turn. For these naturalists, if one abandons strict physicalism, one has

rejected a scientific naturalist approach to the mind/body problem and opened oneself up to the intrusion of religious concepts and arguments about the mental.

Searle offers his analysis of the mind as a naturalistic account because, he says, no one in the modern world can deny “the obvious facts of physics—for example, that the world is made up entirely of physical particles in fields of force” (Searle 1992: 28). Thus, scientific naturalism requires rejection of some pretty obvious features of ourselves that constitute the core of the pervasive, reflective, commonsense view of ourselves.

The difficulty for scientific naturalism in accounting for the commonsense features of human beings has not been noticed simply by notable atheists. In fact, the nature of human persons has led some to embrace theism. In the seismic book recounting the shift to theism by famous atheist Antony Flew—*There is a God*—Roy Abraham Varghese notes that

the rationality [consciousness, freedom of the will, and unified self] that we unmistakably experience—ranging from the laws of nature to our capacity for rational thought—cannot be explained if it does not have an ultimate ground, which can be nothing less than an infinite mind.

(Flew and Varghese 2007: 167)

In what follows, I shall, first, offer a brief sketch of contemporary scientific naturalism, and, second, mention five features of human persons that provide evidence against naturalism and for biblical theism. These five features figure prominently in current theistic vs. anti-theistic arguments about human nature.

The Nature of Scientific Naturalism

Naturalism usually includes:

1. different aspects of a naturalist epistemic attitude (for example, a rejection of so-called “first philosophy,” which is the idea that there are intellectual issues whose resolution is autonomous from the sciences) along with an acceptance of either weak or strong scientism. The *strong* version of scientism maintains that science provides us with the *sole* basis of knowledge; the *weaker* version claims that science furnishes us with the *most certain* basis of knowledge, even if other disciplines provide more weakly justified beliefs or knowledge);
2. a Grand Story which amounts to an etiological account of how all entities whatsoever have come to be, told in terms of an event causal story described in natural scientific terms with a central role given to the atomic theory of matter and evolutionary biology;
3. a general ontology in which the only entities allowed are those that either (a) bear a relevant similarity to those thought to characterize a completed form of physics or (b) are dependent on and determined by the entities of physics and can be explained according to the causal necessitation requirement (given a “suitable” arrangement of matter, the emergent entity *must* arise) in terms of the Grand Story and the naturalist epistemic attitude.

For most naturalists, the ordering of these three ingredients is important. The naturalist epistemic attitude serves as justification for the naturalist etiology, which, in turn,

helps to justify the naturalist's ontological commitment. Moreover, naturalism seems to require coherence among the postulates of these three different areas of the naturalistic turn. For example, there should be coherence among third-person scientific ways of knowing; a physical, evolutionary account of how our sensory and cognitive processes came to be; and an ontological analysis of those processes themselves. Any entities that are taken to exist should bear a relevant similarity to entities that characterize our best physical theories; their coming-to-be should be intelligible in light of the naturalist causal story; and they should be knowable by scientific means.

Scientism constitutes the core of the naturalist epistemology. Wilfrid Sellars said that "in the dimension of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things, of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not" (Sellars 1963: 173). Contemporary naturalists embrace either weak or strong scientism. According to the former, nonscientific fields are not worthless nor do they offer no intellectual results, but they are vastly inferior to science in their epistemic standing and do not merit full credence. According to the latter, unqualified cognitive value resides in science and in nothing else. Either way, naturalists are extremely skeptical of any claims about reality that are not justified by scientific methodology in the hard sciences.

The scientific methodology is a third-person one that sanctions only entities capable of exhaustive description from a third-person perspective. Skepticism prevails for entities that require the first-person perspective as their basic mode of epistemic access. For such naturalists, the elevated nature of scientific knowledge entails that those explanations employed in the hard sciences are either the only explanations that count or the ones with superior, unqualified acceptance (I am assuming here a realist construal of explanation). At least two philosophical theses support the naturalistic epistemic and methodological constraints for philosophy. First, there is no such thing as first philosophy. Second, scientific theories that are paradigm cases of epistemic/explanatory success, for example, the atomic theory of matter, evolutionary biology, employ combinatorial modes of explanation. Thus any process that constitutes the Grand Story and any entity in the naturalist ontology should exhibit an ontological structure analyzable in terms that are isomorphic with such modes of explanation. Colin McGinn has defended this idea:

Can we gain any deeper insight into what makes the problem of consciousness run against the grain of our thinking? Are our modes of theorizing about the world of the wrong shape to extend to the nature of mind? I think we can discern a characteristic structure possessed by successful scientific theories, a structure that is unsuitable for explaining consciousness . . . Perhaps the most basic aspect of thought is the operation of *combination*. This is the way in which we think of complex entities as resulting from the arrangement of simpler parts. There are three aspects to this basic idea: the atoms we start with, the laws we use to combine them, and the resulting complexes . . . I think it is clear that this mode of understanding is central . . . [and] our scientific faculty involves representing the world in this combinatorial style.

(McGinn 2000: 55–6; cf. 54–62, 90, 95)

In sum, the naturalist epistemic attitude countenances and only countenances (i) the hard sciences along with mathematical empiricism as the paradigm of knowledge, (ii) a certification of third-person ways of knowing while eschewing the first-person, (iii) an

employment of combinatorial modes of explanation for the nature, coming-to-be and perishing of all macro-wholes above the basic level of micro-physical particles (waves, wavicles, strings, or whatever; hereafter, simply “particles”), and (iv) a rejection of first philosophy.

Let us call the naturalist creation account “the Grand Story,” which goes as follows. All of reality—space, time, and matter—came from the Big Bang and various heavenly bodies developed as the universe expanded. On at least the earth, some sort of pre-biotic soup scenario explains how living things came into being from non-living chemicals. And the processes of evolution, understood in either neo-Darwinian or punctuated equilibrium terms, gave rise to all the life forms we see, including human beings. Thus, all organisms and their parts exist and are what they are because they contributed to (or at least did not hinder) the struggle for reproductive advantage, more specifically, because they contributed to the tasks of feeding, fighting, fleeing, and reproducing.

The Grand Story has three key features. First, at its core are two theories that result from combinatorial modes of explanation: the atomic theory of matter and evolutionary theory. If we take John Searle to be representative of naturalists here, this means that causal explanations, specifically, bottom-up but not top-down causal explanations, are central to the (alleged) explanatory superiority of the Grand Story (Searle 1992: 83–93).

Second, it expresses a scientific philosophical monism according to which everything that exists or happens in the world is susceptible to explanations by natural scientific methods. *Prima facie*, the most consistent way to understand naturalism in this regard is to see it as entailing some version of strong physicalism: everything that exists is fundamentally matter, most likely, elementary “particles,” organized in various ways according to the laws of nature. By keeping track of these particles and their physical traits we are keeping track of everything that exists. No non-physical entities exist, including emergent ones. When naturalists venture away from strong physicalism, however, they still argue that additions to a strong physicalist ontology must be depicted as rooted in, emergent from, dependent upon the physical states and events of the Grand Story.

Third, the Grand Story is constituted by event causality and eschews both irreducible teleology and agent causation in which the first relatum of the causal relation is in the category of substance and not event. In this sense, at the fundamental level of analysis, the only sort of causality permitted is mechanical and efficient-causal. And the Grand Story is deterministic in two senses: diachronically such that the state of the universe at any time, *t*, coupled with the laws of nature, determine or fix the chances for the state of the universe at subsequent times; synchronically such that the features of and changes regarding macro-wholes are dependent on and determined by micro-phenomena.

Finally, it is important to say a bit more about naturalist ontological commitments. A good place to start is with what Frank Jackson calls the location problem (Jackson 1998: 1–5). According to Jackson, given that naturalists are committed to a fairly widely accepted physical story about how things came to be and what they are, the location problem is the task of locating or finding a place for some entity (for example, semantic contents, mind, agency) in that story. As an illustration, Jackson shows how the solidity of macro-objects can be located within a naturalist worldview. If solidity is taken as impenetrability, then given the lattice structure of atoms composing, say, a table and chair, it becomes obvious why they cannot penetrate each other. Given the naturalist micro-story, the macro-world could not have been different: the table *could not* penetrate the chair. Location is necessitation.

So, again, we see that there are three constraints for developing a naturalist ontology and locating entities within it:

1. Entities should conform to the naturalist epistemology.
2. Entities should conform to the naturalist Grand Story.
3. Entities should bear a relevant similarity to those found in chemistry and physics or be shown to depend necessarily on entities in chemistry and physics.

Regarding the naturalist epistemology, all entities should be knowable by third-person scientific means. Regarding the Grand Story, one should be able to show how any entity had to appear in light of the naturalist event causal story according to which the history of the cosmos amounts to a series of events governed by natural law in which micro-parts come together to form various aggregates with increasingly complex physical structures.

Five Recalcitrant Features of the Image of God

The fundamental issue is this. Given biblical theism, the basic Being is a unified, conscious self with rationality, free will and intrinsic value. Given that these metaphysical features are fundamental in existence, it is hardly surprising that they appear elsewhere in the created order, especially in association with beings that are alleged to have been created to be like God. Thus, biblical theism predicts that these five features are irreducible, un-eliminable aspects of human persons, and the fact that they seem to be such provides confirmation of biblical theism. But things don't go so well for the scientific naturalist. He or she begins not with the Logos, but with particles (strings, waves) that are brute, mechanical, unconscious, non-rational, non-teleological, subject to law, and bereft of value. And then a story is told about how these continue to re-arrange into larger and larger aggregates of the same stuff. On this view, living organisms, including human persons, are relational structures of parts held together by various forces, not unified, uncomposed substantial selves. For sixty years or so, naturalists have tried to reduce or eliminate these five features of human persons in order to depict them in ways natural to a scientific atheistic worldview and within the bounds of its constraints. And labeling these features "emergent phenomena" is just a name, a place holder for the problem to be solved—namely, how could it be that they emerged in the first place?—and not a solution. But human persons have resisted such efforts—they are recalcitrant facts for naturalists—and this is exactly what would be predicted if biblical theism is true.

Let's probe these issues more fully. Since there is a similar pattern of dialectic for each of the five aspects of human persons, I shall examine the first feature—consciousness and the mental—in more detail and treat the last four in a more cursory fashion.

1. *Consciousness and the mental.* Many believe that finite minds provide evidence of a Divine Mind as their creator. If we limit our options to biblical theism and naturalism, it is hard to see how finite consciousness could result from the rearrangement of brute matter; it is easier to see how a Conscious Being could produce finite consciousness.

This argument assumes a commonsense understanding of conscious states such as sensations, thoughts, beliefs, desires, volitions. So understood, mental states are in no sense physical since they possess five features not owned by physical states:

- (i) there is a raw qualitative feel or a “what it is like” to have a mental state such as a pain;
- (ii) many mental states have intentionality—*ofness* or *aboutness*—directed towards an object (e.g., a thought is *about* the moon);
- (iii) mental states are inner, private and immediate to the subject having them;
- (iv) mental states fail to have crucial features (e.g., spatial extension, location) that characterize physical states and, in general, cannot be described using physical language;
- (v) mental states are constituted by qualitatively simple properties (e.g., being a pain or a sensation of red), but physical states are constituted by quantitative, structural properties (e.g., being a C-fiber firing).

Given that conscious states are immaterial and not physical, at least two reasons have been offered for why there can be no natural scientific explanation for the existence of conscious states:

(a) *Something from nothing*. Before consciousness appeared, the universe contained nothing but aggregates of particles/waves standing in fields of forces. The naturalistic story of the cosmos’ evolution involves the rearrangement of atomic parts into increasingly more complex structures according to natural law. Matter is brute mechanical, physical stuff. The emergence of consciousness seems to be a case of getting something from nothing. In general, physico-chemical reactions do not generate consciousness. Some say they do in the brain, yet brains seem similar to other parts of organisms’ bodies (for example, both are collections of cells totally describable in physical terms). How can like causes produce radically different effects? The appearance of mind is utterly unpredictable and inexplicable. This radical discontinuity seems like a rupture in the natural world.

(b) *The inadequacy of evolutionary explanations*. Naturalists claim that evolutionary explanations can be proffered for the appearance of all organisms and their parts. In principle, an evolutionary account could be given for increasingly complex physical structures that constitute different organisms. However, organisms are black boxes as far as evolution is concerned. As long as an organism, when receiving certain inputs, generates the correct behavioral outputs under the demands of reproductive advantage, the organism will survive. What goes on inside the organism is irrelevant and only becomes significant for the processes of evolution when an output is produced. Strictly speaking, it is the output, not what caused it, that bears on the struggle for reproductive advantage. Moreover, the functions organisms carry out consciously *could just as well have been done unconsciously*. Thus, both the sheer existence of conscious states and the precise mental content that constitutes them are outside the pale of evolutionary explanation.

It will not do to claim that consciousness simply emerged from matter when it reached a certain level of complexity, because “emergence” is merely a label for, and not an explanation of, the phenomena to be explained. Accordingly, the most plausible naturalistic response is to identify mental properties/events with physical ones. Unfortunately, in light of the five features of mental states listed above, this move is a hard sell for many of us.

2. *Free will*. It is widely acknowledged that worldwide, the commonsense, spontaneously formed understanding of human free will is what philosophers call libertarian freedom: one acts freely only if one’s action was not determined—directly or indirectly—by forces

outside his control, and one must be free to act or refrain from acting; one's choice is "spontaneous," it originates with and only with the actor.

Unless one has an ideological axe to grind, one will be a libertarian. And even if one's ideology requires one to adopt an alternative view of "free will" compatible with determinism, I believe that one will continue to act on and actually believe the libertarian account in one's daily life and dealings with oneself and others, when one is not, as it were, reminding oneself of one's ideological commitments.

It is not my purpose to argue for libertarianism, and I have already shown why I feel less intellectual pressure to do so than you, the reader, may expect. I simply offer two fairly obvious remarks. For one thing, as John Searle has recently noted, the experience of libertarian free will is compelling, so compelling in fact, that people cannot act as though that experience is an illusion, even if it is one (Searle 2007). He reminds us that when we are presented by the waiter with a choice between pork or veal, we cannot bring ourselves to reply, "Look, I'm a determinist. I'll just have to wait and see what order happens!"

For another thing, a thought experiment will, I believe, make evident the power of libertarian intuitions. Suppose a scientist slips into your room at night while you are asleep, places an electrode in your brain, quietly sets up his computer across the street, and by simply typing a specific word is able to cause any mental state—sensation, belief, thought, desire—to occur in you that he wishes. And suppose, further, that once the mental state happens, it inexorably determines what your body must do. The next day, you arise, take a morning walk, and just as you are about to pass a stranger, the scientist, filled with malicious intent, types in the right word, it causes you to have a desire to hit the stranger in the nose, and this desire deterministically causes your arm to move and your hand to smack the stranger in the face.

Question: Who did this act? Who is responsible for it? Clearly it is not you. The responsible actor is the scientist who hit the stranger through you. You did not have a free choice about the matter. Why? Surely not because the controller (the scientist) is either atypical, his desires were contrary to the ones you would have had if left alone, or the causal chain between the scientist's action and yours was deviant. No, it's because the movement of your arm was determined by factors outside your control. Only if your action was not determined and was brought about spontaneously by you such that you could have refrained from bringing it about, only then was it *your* action.

Libertarian freedom is incompatible with the generally accepted depiction of naturalism presented earlier. Thus, John Searle says that "our conception of physical reality simply does not allow for radical [libertarian] freedom" (Searle 1984: 98). And if moral (and intellectual) responsibility has such freedom as a necessary condition, then reconciling the naturalist and ethical perspectives is impossible. In what might be the best naturalist attempt to accomplish such a reconciliation, John Bishop frankly admits that

the idea of a responsible agent, with the "originative" ability to initiate events in the natural world, does not sit easily with the idea of [an agent as] a natural organism. . . . Our scientific understanding of human behavior seems to be in tension with a presupposition of the ethical stance we adopt toward it.

(Bishop 1989: 1)

Bishop's own solution eschews libertarian agency in favor of a version of compatibilism.

There are many reasons why an atheist might admit that free will is incompatible with scientific naturalism. But here's a major one. All the particular things and their behavior in the naturalist ontology are law-like and, so, subsumable under laws of nature. In fact, all of them are subject to diachronic and synchronic determinism in the following sense: Regarding diachronic determinism, at some time, t , the physical conditions are sufficient to determine or fix the chances of the next event involving the object and its environment. Regarding synchronic determinism, at any time, t , the object's states and movements are determined or have their chances fixed by the micro-physical states of the object and its environment. This latter determination is bottom-up.

Further, a free act involves an exercise of active power by a first-mover, an uncaused causer, an undetermined actor. By contrast, since all events in a naturalist ontology are passive happenings, they all are examples of moved movers, that is, something has to happen to an object first, namely, an event that triggers and actualizes its passive causal powers, before it can cause something else to happen. In this sense, all naturalistic causation involves changed changers. But a first-mover can actively produce change without having to change first to do so. It should be obvious why such an agent is not an object that can be located in a naturalist ontology. Unmoved movers with active power are quintessentially unnatural. Indeed, they are exactly like the God of the Bible in this regard.

3. *Rationality*. The Christian philosopher Victor Reppert says: "the necessary conditions for rationality cannot exist in a naturalistic universe" (Reppert 2003: 70). And Reppert goes on to argue that the ontology of human rationality provides evidence for theism as its best explanation. But it is not simply theists who acknowledge that human rationality is a problem for naturalism and can be explained by theism. According to naturalist Thomas Nagel:

The problem then will be not how, if we engage in it, reason can be valid, but how, if it is universally valid, we can engage in it. There are not many candidate answers to this question. Probably the most popular nonsubjectivist answer nowadays is an evolutionary naturalism: We can reason in these ways because it is a consequence of a more primitive capacity of belief formation that had survival value during the period when the human brain was evolving. This explanation has always seemed to me to be laughably inadequate . . . The other well-known answer is the religious one. The universe is intelligible to us because it and our minds were made for each other.

(Nagel 1997: 75)

There are at least two reasons why human persons can't be rational agents in a scientific naturalist worldview, but are predicted to be precisely such in a biblical worldview: the necessity of the enduring, rational self and the room for teleological factors to play a role in thought processes.

Not only must there be a unified self at each time in the sequence, but also an identical self that endures through the rational act. If the conclusion of a syllogism is to be grasped as a conclusion, it must be *drawn* from the experiences of each premise singularly and, then, together. A successive series of I-stages cannot engage in such acts; only an enduring I can. Moreover, if the rational agent who embraces the conclusion is to be regarded as intellectually responsible for his reasoning, it must be the same self

at the end of the process as the self who lived through the stages of reasoning that led to drawing the conclusion. One is not responsible for the acts of others or of other person-stages. So intellectual responsibility seems to presuppose an enduring I. But on the naturalist view, I am a collection of parts such that if I gain and lose parts, I am literally a different aggregate from one moment to the next. Thus, there is no such enduring I that could serve as the unifier of rational thought on a naturalist view.

But there's more. Consider the following argument:

- (i) If naturalism is true, there is no irreducible teleology.
- (ii) Rational deliberation exhibits irreducible teleology.
- (iii) Therefore, naturalism is false.

Explanations in terms of reasons in which the occurrence of an action (for example, Jones raised his hand) is explained by citing the reason for the action (for example, in order to vote)—which I shall call “reasons explanations”—are irreducibly teleological, and various inductive or deductive thought processes reason through a series of steps *in order to* or *for the sake of* reaching a sound, true, rational conclusion. To see this, look at these two sentences:

- (iv) The glass broke because the rock hit it.
- (v) I raised my hand because I wanted to vote.

(v) offers a reasons explanation and (iv) does not. (iv) cites an efficient cause after “because” (the rock hitting the glass). But (v) is very different. It cites a teleological goal or end (to satisfy the desire to vote, to make a difference in the culture, and so on) for the sake of which the person raised his/her hand.

Besides the analysis of reasons explanations, when one attends to one's own endeavors, it becomes introspectively evident that the various steps in such processes are formulated for the sake of drawing a particular conclusion. If one pays attention to fairly simple mental states in second-order awarenesses of first-order states, then it seems reasonable to say that unless there are substantial, non-question-begging, overriding defeaters, then one should believe that things are as they seem. For example, a pain is as it seems to be in such acts. Similarly, one's own teleological endeavors are as they seem.

Additionally, when one attends to the different states containing propositional, mental contents in rational sequences that constitute the inductive or deductive premises of the sequence, it becomes evident that these states are *means*—*rational means*—to the end of drawing the conclusion. And when one attends to both the drawing of the conclusion and the conclusion so drawn, it becomes evident that the conclusion is the *end* for the sake of which the process was undergone.

4. *Unified selves*. Naturalism cannot countenance a substantial, enduring mental self. Here is the basic reason for this inability: If one starts with separable parts, and simply re-arranges them according to natural laws into new relational structures constituted by external relations, then in the category of individual, one's ontology will have atomic simples (*sans* difficulties with such) and mereological aggregates with insufficient unity to avoid mereological essentialism or to ground absolute unity at and through change.

There are two basic reasons why a substantial, simple soul is not an option for a naturalist. First, if by some sort of magic, a simple soul could be an emergent entity, then given the naturalist commitment to the closure of the physical (all physical events that have causes have entirely physical causes; when tracing the causal antecedents of a physical event, one need not—and, indeed, cannot—leave the physical realm), the soul would be an epiphenomenon with no causal powers. Such an entity would be otiose and, in any case, most naturalists banish entities with no causal power from their ontology, so an epiphenomenal soul is tantamount to a non-existent entity. And the causal closure principle is not arbitrary for a naturalist. It is required because: (a) the naturalist epistemology certifies only the hard sciences, and all other causal accounts (for instance, mental-to-physical) are epistemically opaque and methodologically useless; (b) the Grand Story presents a creation myth told in terms of entities and their various combinations at the level of physics and chemistry, and to require a neuroscientist to have to go to the psychology department before she can provide causal laws relating to changes in the brain would be to deny the creation myth; (c) the determinism of higher levels and their dependence upon the basic level of micro-physics leaves no room for top-down causation.

Second, given the combinatorial processes constitutive of the Grand Story, apart from atomic simples, all larger wholes are mereological aggregates composed of separable, substantial parts that stand in various external (for example, spatio-temporal, causal) relations to each other. Mereological aggregates are not simple substances, and certainly not simple souls. In such an ontology, macro-substances are replaced with structures constituted by myriad relation-instances and separable parts. Thus, Stewart Goetz and Charles Taliaferro correctly note that

[t]he unified incorporation of all phenomena in a natural scientific philosophy means that the difference between being a fully conscious human being . . . and any inanimate matter and energy is chiefly a matter of complexity, configuration, and function rather than of nature or substance.

(Goetz and Taliaferro 2008: 21)

Carl Sagan flatly asserts: “I am a collection of water, calcium and organic molecules called Carl Sagan. You are a collection of almost identical molecules with a different collective label” (Sagan 1980: 105). Terms such as “configuration,” “system,” “organization,” “collection” capture nicely the non-substantial, relational nature of such aggregates.

5. *Intrinsic, equal value and rights.* Biblical theism can, but scientific naturalism cannot, account for the high, equal value/rights of human persons simply as such. Naturalists Peter Singer and Helga Kuhse acknowledge that the best and perhaps only way to justify the belief that all humans have equal and unique value simply as such is in light of the metaphysical grounding of the Judeo-Christian doctrine of the image of God (Kuhse and Singer 1985: 118–39).

This claim by Singer and Kuhse has been acknowledged by a wide number of thinkers for some time. For example, in the early 1960s, Joel Feinberg, arguably the leading legal, political philosopher of that time, advanced the following argument (Feinberg 1973: 84–97). According to Feinberg, a natural right is a human right held unalterably, unconditionally, and possessing certain epistemological properties (for example, being

perceivable by direct, rational intuition) and metaphysical groundings. If human rights are natural rights that apply to all human persons equally, then they presuppose equal human worth but not equal merit. Human merit (talents, skills, character, personality, various abilities) is graded, but human worth is not. Equal rights accrue to individuals quite apart from their graded merit.

Feinberg believes that the following skeptical question has never been adequately answered: Why should we treat all people equally in any respect in the face of manifest inequalities of merit among them? The simple response "because we just have such worth" does not answer the skeptic's query. If "human worth" is real and generic, says Feinberg, then it must supervene on some subvenient base that first, we all have equally in common and second, that is non-trivial and of supreme moral worth. In contrast, operating within a naturalist framework, Feinberg considers several attempts to delineate that base, and he judges them all to be a failure because they, first, require an entity such as "pricelessness" for which we have no answer as to where it came from and with respect to which one must postulate a problematic, mysterious, intuitive faculty of direct awareness of such an entity; second, are grounded in a degreed property (one that is possessed to a greater or lesser degree) such as rationality (and Feinberg takes the potential for rationality to be degreed) which, therefore, cannot do the job of founding equal worth for all; and third, simply name the problem to be solved and do not provide an explanation of the problem itself.

At the end of the day, Feinberg acknowledges that the notion of equal worth and equal rights for all human persons is groundless and might simply express a non-cognitivist, unjustifiable pro-attitude of respect towards the humanity in each man's person.

Moreover, evolutionary theory has also made equal human value/rights hard to justify when compared to the Christian notion that human nature is real and constituted by the image of God. Thus, David Hull makes the following observation:

The implications of moving species from the metaphysical category that can appropriately be characterized in terms of "natures" to a category for which such characterizations are inappropriate are extensive and fundamental. If species evolve in anything like the way that Darwin thought they did, then they cannot possibly have the sort of natures that traditional philosophers claimed they did. If species in general lack natures, then so does *Homo sapiens* as a biological species. If *Homo sapiens* lacks a nature, then no reference to biology can be made to support one's claims about "human nature." Perhaps all people are "persons," share the same "personhood," etc., but such claims must be explicated and defended *with no reference to biology*. Because so many moral, ethical, and political theories depend on some notion or other of human nature, Darwin's theory brought into question all these theories. The implications are not entailments. One can always dissociate "*Homo sapiens*" from "human being," but the result is a much less plausible position.

(Hull 1989: 74–5)

Similarly, James Rachels claims that

the traditional supports for the idea of human dignity are gone. They have not survived the colossal shift of perspective brought about by Darwin's theory. It might be thought that this result need not be devastating for the idea of human

dignity, because even if the traditional supports are gone, the idea might still be defended on some *other* grounds. Once again, though, an evolutionary perspective is bound to make one skeptical. The doctrine of human dignity says that humans merit a level of moral concern wholly different from that accorded to mere animals; for this to be true, there would have to be some big, morally significant difference between them. Therefore, any adequate defense of human dignity would require some conception of human beings as radically different from other animals. But that is precisely what evolutionary theory calls into question. It makes us suspicious of any doctrine that sees large gaps of any sort between humans and all other creatures. This being so, a Darwinian may conclude that a successful defense of human dignity is most unlikely.

(Rachels 1990: 171–2; cf. 93, 97, 171)

Conclusion

The five alleged features of human persons reviewed above are at the center of theistic/anti-theistic debates about human nature. Biblical theists claim these features are real and provide an important degree of confirmation of biblical theism. Anti-theists have tried to reduce these features to, or eliminate them in favor of, physicalist alternatives. Alternatively, they have tried to incorporate one or more of these features, usually by employing an emergentist strategy, into a non-theistic worldview. These debates are sure to continue into the foreseeable future, just as biblical theism would predict, given the recalcitrant and commonsense nature of the image of God.

Related Topics

Chapter 17: Evolution; Chapter 22: Sociology; Chapter 23: Psychology; Chapter 37: Globalization; Chapter 54: The Meaning of Life

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Recommended Reading

- Clayton, P. (2004) *Mind & Emergence*, New York: Oxford. Claims that consciousness is simply one of many emergent properties with no need for theistic explanation.
- Craig, W. L. and J. P. Moreland (eds), (2009) *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, Malden, MA: Blackwell. Contains chapters by Moreland, Reppert, and Linville advancing theistic arguments for consciousness, reason and free will, and intrinsic human value, respectively.
- McGinn, C. (2000) *The Mysterious Flame*, New York: Basic Books. Opts for a “mysterian naturalist” explanation for consciousness after concluding that no other naturalist explanation is available.
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Part III

THEISM AND THE
SOCIO-POLITICAL
REALM

31

CIVIL SOCIETY

Edward Langerak

For the past few decades, the term “civil society” has often referred either to the voluntary associations that are distinguishable from the government and the marketplace or to a “public sphere” in which debates about the public good take place. Thus it is seen as a *part* of society (rather than family or tribe), one that is thought by many to nurture through civic engagement the “social capital” central to a healthy society (Edwards 2004: 5–10; Putnam 2000). The term is also used to refer to a *type* of society, one that engages diversity and disagreement in a civilized way that respects pluralism (Edwards 2004: 10; Langerak 2012). Historically, from Plato and Aristotle through Hobbes and Locke, the category of civil society included the state and government with its coercive powers. It was de Tocqueville who, impressed by the tendency of Americans to join associations of all types, drew attention to these intermediary voluntary groups as an important social force distinct from that of the state (de Tocqueville 2004 [1840]: 595). Lately the United Nations and many other organizations see this part of society as deserving of international aid and as capable of nurturing the sort of national ethos that respects diversity and pluralism. Whether civil society is understood to include the state, as it did for much of human history, or as including only non-governmental organizations, or as a society that respects pluralism, the relationship of theism to civil society raises important issues.

For early theism, whether in a polytheistic mode such as the Greek city states or in a henotheistic or monotheistic mode such as the Israelites of the Hebrew scriptures, there tended to be no separation or even distinction between religion and social or political structures. As the trial and death of Socrates showed, details of one’s theism were a political and legal issue for the Greeks. For the Hebrews, the role of prophet regularly involved overlap, sometimes integration, and often tension with those of judge, priest, or king. Such integration of the religious, civic, and political aspects of society remains the ideal of a minority of Jews and Christians and probably the majority of Muslims in today’s world. The latter combine their monotheism with a vision of *sharia* or religious law that does not distinguish religious duties from moral or legal ones, though this vision becomes more complicated and qualified in religiously pluralistic societies in which Islam is one religion among others. Sometimes, as in India, Muslims are granted the privilege that the Muslim Ottoman Empire granted to its religious minorities, namely the right to apply their own religious law in family matters (marriage, divorce, inheritance, and so on), while the same criminal law applies to adherents of all religions.

Christianity was an often-persecuted religion for its first few centuries, so its scriptures and early writings called for a distinction between what is owed to God and what owed to Caesar (Jesus; Matthew 22:21; Mark 12:17; Luke 20:25). Even St Paul’s

insistence that non-Christian government is God-appointed (Romans 13:1) was combined with his insistence that Christians not be conformed to this world (Romans 12:2). St Augustine interpreted these and similar passages as teaching that Christians live in two cities: an earthly city motivated by self-love and pride and a heavenly city motivated by love for God; Christians are *peregrini* or “resident aliens,” (or pilgrims, foreigners) whose real citizenship is the City of God (Augustine 1950 [420]: 609). Resident aliens can appreciate the city in which they dwell, uphold its laws and pay its taxes, all of which Augustine recommended, but they cannot run for political office, which is why later Augustinians, such as Luther and Calvin, can be described as advocating “dual citizenship” in two kingdoms or governments. Just as St Paul appealed to his Roman citizenship while insisting on the overriding importance of his heavenly calling, the reformers claimed that work in the world was a divinely ordained vocation even if it was subordinate to one’s eternal salvation (Luther 1962 [1523]; Calvin 1960 [1559]: 1485–90). They contrasted their dual citizenship approach to the medieval distinction between the calling or the true vocation of the monastic life (a version of Augustine’s resident alien) and the more mundane life of ordinary believers. Of course, there was debate about the relationship between the two citizenships, which was part of the wider debate throughout Christian history about the relationship between one’s religious convictions and the civic and political culture of one’s world. The most cited overview of this wider debate is H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* (1951), in which he describes five broad views: Christ Against Culture (emphasis on conflict with, and rejection of, worldly culture); The Christ of Culture (accommodation of religion to worldly culture); Christ Above Culture (synthesis of worldly culture with the higher calling of the gospel); Christ and Culture in Paradox (Luther’s two kingdoms doctrine); and Christ the Transformer of Culture (neo-Calvinist integration of religious convictions with cultural, civic, and political endeavors). Analogies to most of these categories can be found in non-Christian theisms, but I will focus on three issues within the Christian tradition debated since the Reformation and the Enlightenment, debates about theism and civic life that occur within and across most of the views outlined by Niebuhr. These issues arise when monotheism finds itself in a pluralistic civic society.

Respect for Error

What attitude should monotheists, those who accept a particular revelation as the truth, take toward views that contradict their own? The contradiction could be from agnostics or atheists or from theists whose vision of the good or version of the truth contradicts one’s own. One answer is that the view of the other must be blinded by sin or ignorance or some serious cognitive error; in any case it cannot be reasonable or defensible. Stuart Hampshire famously attributed this negative attitude toward all monotheists:

Those who accept the thesis of monotheism will believe that all mankind is subject to the same moral constraints, and that only one conception of the good is finally acceptable. Even if it does not become a positive duty to proselytize, as Christian missionaries do, and to act politically in support of the one authoritative conception of the good, such believers cannot consistently accept that many different conceptions of the good are, or in principle may be, defensible.

(Hampshire 2000: 51–2)

Hampshire's claim might be supported by all those church councils that decided on rather detailed and controversial theological views and then pronounced that anyone not accepting them is *anathema*. One might object that, today, many monotheists are either *inclusivists* or *pluralists*, the former believing that truth can be found in other religions and the latter believing that different religions are different paths to the same good. But Hampshire could reply that most monotheists are *particularists* (or *exclusivists*), believing that there is only one path to salvation (sometimes called soteriological exclusivism) and that contradictory views are wrong (doctrinal exclusivism).

There is little doubt that sometimes particularism has expressed itself with the sort of spiritual and intellectual arrogance that demonizes everyone who disagrees. But there is no reason in principle why it could not be expressed with spiritual and intellectual humility. Even missionaries could agree that contradictory views are reasonable and morally fruitful although, as exclusivists, they see them as false (Adeney 1995: 184–91). There is no reason why exclusivists could not accept John Rawls's "burdens of judgment" (Rawls 1996: 54–8), which consists of a number of common sources of disagreement between reasonable people (such as complexity of issues, imprecision of concepts, different ranking of agreed on values, and different ways of life). One can admit, as does Rawls, that sometimes "prejudice and bias, self- and group interest, blindness and willfulness" (Rawls 1996: 58) play a role in disagreements and, beyond that, one can believe that corruption and sin often have bad cognitive effects on human reasoning and still believe that people can contradict each other on all sorts of issue while both sides have defensible and justifiable positions.

It is true that most monotheists, especially exclusivists, are not relativists about truth; when there is a contradiction they will believe that at least one side is wrong. But they can reject relativism of truth while accepting relativism of justification. The earth has always circled the sun, but there was a time and place when it was reasonable to think otherwise. Slavery has always been wrong, but there was a time and place when at least some forms of it were rationally defensible. This is because of what Nicholas Wolterstorff calls *situated rationality*:

Rationality is always situational, in the sense that what is rational for one person to believe will not be rational for another to believe. Thus in general we cannot inquire into the rationality of some belief by asking whether one would be rational in holding that belief. We must ask whether it would be rational for this particular person to hold it, of whether it would be rational for a person of this type in this situation to hold it.

(Wolterstorff 1983: 65)

So, *pace* Hampshire, a monotheist can grant that a contrary view of the good is defensible, even if wrong. Depending on the situation, error can be respected as reasonably justified, as in the common parlance, "I think you are wrong but you are defending a position I respect."

Strictly speaking, it is not so much the *content* of the belief that one is respecting as it is the *believing*—the way the believer arrives at, holds, or defends the belief. The content of a belief might be quite acceptable, but if it is believed by reading tea leaves, we do not have a reasonable believing. So respect for another's position or believing is a type of what Stephen Darwall calls "appraisal respect" for merit, as opposed to the "recognition respect" that, for example, we owe persons by virtue of their moral status (Darwall

1977). That monotheists base the moral and religious status of persons on their being created in God's image or on God's relationship with them has implications for how they treat those in error quite apart from whether they respect the others' positions.

Toleration

The criteria for whether we respect another's position are largely the sort of intellectual criteria we use for theory selection and for evaluation of claims—internal coherence, consistency with well-established beliefs, clarity, and so on—but whether or not we respect another's view as reasonable, we still have the moral question of whether to tolerate actions or practices generated by the beliefs we think are wrong. So the criteria for whether to tolerate behavior involve the morally relevant features and consequences of using or refraining from using whatever coercive measures are needed to stop the behavior. Thus, one might decide to tolerate a behavior based on a believing one does not respect, as with political talk or demonstrations one finds obnoxious, and to be intolerant of behavior based on a believing one does respect, as when a religiously devout physician, who appreciates using the Bible to guide behavior, obtains a court order to override Jehovah's Witness parents' efforts to shield their infant from a medically necessary blood transfusion. In both cases one weighs the relevant moral considerations and makes an all-things-considered judgment, sometimes reluctantly.

In its root meaning, *toleration* is the enduring of something disagreeable; it is not indifference toward matters one does not care about, and it is not broad-minded celebration of differences. Since it involves the decision not to use coercion, it is not merely resignation to the inevitable, although it can be granted reluctantly when one decides that coercion, while possible, would come at too high a cost. In a civil society intolerance is often *indirect*; rather than personally confronting reckless drivers or tax evaders one votes for laws that call for enforcement agencies to do so. Also, in a civil society, whether to tolerate or not generally applies to others *acting* on beliefs (including, sometimes, expressing them) rather than to the holding of them or to the persons holding them.

It is no accident that one of the earliest and most cited defenses of toleration, John Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration* (1983 [1689]), concerned religious toleration, since religion is the subject on which conflicting disagreeable opinions are most deeply felt. Here is the usually accepted story of the debate over religious toleration: when humans thought that the gods were local and that the gods' concerns were provincial, we could worship our gods while allowing and encouraging others to worship their gods. Polytheism was quite compatible with religious toleration or, at least, indifference to what others worshiped. Of course, religious differences could still pump up the intensity with which cities and states fought over economic and political issues. When the Jews thought their god was the most powerful among the gods, they did not expect or necessarily desire others to agree. Even when the most powerful god was revealed as the One Creator God, resulting in a monotheism with universal implications, God's call was directed primarily toward a chosen people. Although priests and prophets debated whether the call was to a *most-favored* nation or to one with *added responsibilities*, the call did not always require intolerance toward other religions (though, again, theology could pump up the intensity of territorial disputes). However, when God revealed to Christianity and Islam a universal doctrine of exclusive salvation, mandating them to make disciples of all the nations, unbelief and apostasy took on new and troubling meaning, especially when theological concerns were linked to the coercive power of the state.

The question about toleration became one of why we should let pernicious error create confusion and disorder and lead the gullible to perdition. Both justice and compassion required us to consider the eternal destiny of those in the wrong or, at least, the souls of those who might get corrupted if we maintained a *laissez-faire* attitude toward religious error. Given the above assumptions, once monotheism became not just universalistic but also expansionistic and exclusivistic, the argument for the Inquisition was seen as both pious and reasonable.

What changed? It is fair to say that prudential considerations, rather than moral or theological principles, were the first stimulus toward toleration. When religious wars made life uncertain, nasty, and too often short, and sheer exhaustion caused Europe to rethink the issues of heresy and toleration, Locke's appeal to what can and cannot be avoided became persuasive.

It is not the diversity of Opinions, (which cannot be avoided) but the refusal of Toleration to those that are of different Opinions, (which might have been Granted) that has produced all the Bustles and Wars, that have been in the Christian World, upon account of Religion. The Heads and Leaders of the Church, moved by Avarice and insatiable desire of Dominion, making use of the immoderate Ambition of Magistrates, and the credulous Superstition of the giddy Multitude, have incensed and animated them against those that dissent from themselves; by preaching unto them, contrary to the Laws of the Gospel and to the Precepts of Charity, That Schismatics and Hereticks are to be outed of their Possessions, and destroyed.

(Locke 1983 [1689]: 55)

Even those who rejected his account of the low motives for intolerance, could accept his claim that diversity of opinion was inevitable. Locke was not one to celebrate diversity; he merely insisted on the irrationality of not enduring it. Even then he is notorious for not extending toleration to Catholics and atheists, on the grounds that they threatened harm to the state, the former because they pledged highest allegiance to a foreign prince and the latter because they were not motivated to keep their pledges.

Locke's appeal to the prudence of toleration, however reluctant, was probably the most persuasive justification to an England that had just lived through Cromwell's battles, the beheading of King Charles I, and the Protestant-Catholic uncertainties of the Restoration. England was ready for Locke's pragmatic argument about how to stabilize the peace of the 1688 "Glorious Revolution" of William and Mary. But Locke also had what he called a principal consideration, namely that true religion requires "inward perswasion of the Mind . . . [so] Penalties in this case are absolutely impertinent; because they are not proper to convince the mind" (Locke 1983 [1689]: 27). So intolerance was not just imprudent, it was irrational:

I may grow rich by an Art that I take not delight in; I may be cured of some Disease by Remedies that I have not Faith in; but I cannot be saved by a Religion that I distrust, and by a worship that I abhor.

(Locke 1983 [1689]: 38)

However, this argument against compulsion for sincere belief was well known to those who did not tolerate apostasy, including the Inquisition and John Calvin, and was even

taught in the Qur'an (Sura 2:256). The problem is that there can be indirect control over sincere belief: forcing people to listen to the truth and applying pressure to them might result in a sincere conversion. In any case, those using coercion might well be less concerned for the soul of the heretic and more concerned for the souls of those who should be shielded from pernicious error. So the argument that persecution is irrational has its limits.

A sound way to provide for the sort of religious liberty we find in pluralistic democracies is to give morally principled justifications for toleration that appeal to the "recognition respect" for persons mentioned earlier. Philosophers find a basis for such recognition in Kantian and utilitarian arguments for respecting persons' autonomy, and theists can and do accept such arguments. There are also distinctly theistic arguments that imply strict limits with using coercion on persons. A traditional one is to appeal to the implication of being created in God's image, which is to recognize in each person a dignity that deserves the sort of love and respect due imagers of God. In other words, some of the awe theists feel toward God they should also feel toward all persons, who image God, both as "mirrors" who have some of God's characteristics, such as creativity, and as "representatives" who have the privilege and responsibility to make stewardly decisions about how to live and act in God's world. Theists argue that this awe toward imagers of God calls for a reverential and diffident love, one that incorporates a "stand-back" element and not just an urge to love, nurture, or value: it "eschews domination" (Stith 1978: 6) and fans both a reason and a passion for seeing individuals as "exalted" and as ends-in-themselves (Tinder 1989: 35–6). Some theists argue that this reverence toward the sanctity of persons provides a firmer ground for toleration than do appeals to utility or to Kantian or other secular arguments for universal dignity (Tinder 1976: 114). Even if liberty is not a religious value in itself, it is such a significant aspect of accepting other important values that we must take a "tragic view of liberty" and admit that the theological requirement to grant it to fallen people, while an act of hope, does make a possible way for sin (Tinder 1989: 102–16). Normal, adult persons must be addressed as hearers and givers of reasons, not just as followers of orders, even of orders that are in their own interests. This justification for religious toleration from theological principle need not agree with some Kantians that autonomy is the highest-ranking norm, but it does provide theists with a powerful motivation for not using coercion against what they see as religious error.

Some theists worry about this approach because it bases recognition respect for humans on capacities that persons have by virtue of being created in God's image. The problem is that humans vary in these capacities and some of them, adults with dementia and babies, for example, do not have those capacities to any extent higher than do some animals. They argue that a firmer grounding for recognizing rights against unjustified coercion is the "bestowed worth" that all humans have by virtue of being loved by God (Wolterstorff 2008: 349–60). This difference in theological grounding does not change the theistic implication that religious toleration flows from an important human right.

Consider what is often called the paradox of toleration: if you are sure that something is wrong, you are committed to believing that the world would be better off without it. Then it seems that you have an obligation to get rid of it. This inference is what has caused a lot of intolerance. The resolution of the paradox is that the obligation is a *prima facie* one; you should not allow the offending practice unless there is a stronger moral reason to tolerate it, such as respecting autonomy. Another way to put it is that you are committed to believing the world is better off without the wrong, all other things

being equal. But the duty to respect autonomy means that the world would be better off without it only if its absence were assured in the right way. And when it is persons or imagers of God that are doing tolerable wrong, it is worse to coerce them than to endure the wrong. Sometimes tolerance is defined in such a way that efforts to persuade people to change their minds are thought to be intolerant (Erlewine 2010: 132), but generally it is understood to allow efforts to persuade and convert, as long as the appeal is to the other's rational capacities rather than to coercive threats or brain-washing.

This point underscores how toleration is logically independent of skepticism. It is true that, usually, if you are quite uncertain that something is wrong, you probably should not try to stop others from doing it. But you can also be very sure that something is wrong, such as certain types of sexual activities, and even try to persuade others that the behavior is wrong, and still believe that you have powerful moral or religious reasons to respect autonomy and therefore to avoid using either direct or indirect coercion to prevent it. Notice that such toleration is very different from refusal to blame and from forgiveness toward the blameworthy. You can be intolerant of the behavior of Christian Scientist parents who, on religious grounds, refuse necessary medical treatment for their children and, at the same time, either refuse to blame them or, if you do blame them, to forgive them. And we might blame and refuse to forgive pornographers while tolerating (within limits) their behavior.

So far the argument has been that theists engaged in civil society have good reasons for respecting as reasonable some of the views they regard as wrong and for tolerating some actions and practices they regard as wrong. Of course, some views might be inordinately ignorant or unintelligent or self-serving, and some actions and practices could be criminally harmful to others. So theists need not believe that respect and toleration are always to be embraced; it all depends on the circumstances and on the intellectual, moral, and theological criteria used to make a situated judgment.

Political Liberalism

All societies have laws that define criminal behavior and also civil law that defines other practices and behaviors that are intolerable. Though civil penalties do not involve threats of incarceration, they can significantly threaten one's economic wellbeing, so they involve threats of coercion, understood as significant threats to one's freedom, health, or wellbeing. When one argues for, or votes for such laws (or for legislators who will vote for them), one is being indirectly intolerant of the behaviors or practices one wants to make illegal. In a pluralistic, democratic society one is sure to encounter disagreement over what the laws should be. The importance of such disagreement and the difficulty of coping with it are heightened by at least four factors. First, the legal power of a state is generally immense, highly coercive (traditionally and evocatively called "the sword power of the state"), and, within its sphere, the final court of appeal. Second, rarely is citizenship a completely voluntary agreement, since relatively few people have the opportunity to change citizenship and, even when they do, the choices are usually quite limited; citizens are typically born into a state and generally they avoid its legal authority only at death. Third, a pluralistic state will include many conflicting decisions about what the laws should be and how to enforce them, decisions that can greatly affect the quality of citizens' lives. Fourth, included within the diversity are conflicting religious and moral convictions that are central to persons' identities and to the commitments that give their lives meaning, structure, and fulfillment. Political

liberalism recognizes the importance of these factors and offers what it sees as a respectful and stabilizing way to cope with deep political disagreement, including that fostered by different and conflicting religious convictions. Theistic reactions to political liberalism have ranged from embracing it to modifying it to rejecting it.

What is political liberalism and what is its relationship to other types of liberalism? What is often called *classical* liberalism is the insistence on individuals' rights, usually in opposition to the hierarchies that presided over most of human history—the monarchies, dictatorships, theocracies, and aristocracies that used entrenched power structures or selected traditional authorities to justify the rule of one or a few over the many. The heavy thinkers of classical liberalism include the seventeenth-century English philosopher John Locke, who emphasized individual property rights, the eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant, who emphasized respect for individuals' autonomy, and the nineteenth-century English philosopher John Stuart Mill, who emphasized individual freedoms. In today's political debates, important elements of classical liberalism are embraced both by "conservatives" (often called "liberals" in Canada, Europe, and Australia and sometimes called "libertarians" in the United States), as well as by the "L word" liberals, those associated with leftist policies. We find this overlap in political outlooks because classical liberalism asserts individual rights while allowing a wide range of intramural debates over precisely which rights to include as well as over which economic and political policies can best implement them. Classical liberalism emerged from at least two important historical movements: the religious battles of the Reformation, and the Enlightenment optimism about using human reason to make social progress. Its resulting hallmarks include favorable dispositions toward toleration, liberty, and individual rights, and the confidence that these can be grounded in self-evident reasons. Typically, it tried to resolve the tension between legitimate authority and individual freedom by using some version of social contract thinking, thereby replacing the top-down theory of the divine right of kings with the bottom-up theory of the consent of the governed.

The political debates between liberal theorists who emphasize individual liberty rights (conservatives) and those who emphasize equal opportunity rights (L word liberals) usually involve different empirical claims about history, psychology, and other social sciences, including claims about which economic systems are most likely to foster the prosperity necessary for a healthy society. In addition, these debates involve appeals to different rankings of the values associated with liberalism, such as liberty and equality, rankings that can be justified only with rather substantive moral beliefs. Such debates, therefore, can involve deep and important moral and religious differences, ones that derive from what Rawls calls different and conflicting but reasonable comprehensive doctrines (Rawls 1996: 13). From these debates *comprehensive* or *philosophical* liberalism has emerged as a way to underscore the point that the debates among different versions of liberalism are not neutral with respect to controversial moral and religious values, to conflicting visions of the good life, or to metaphysical disputes about human nature and the human condition. Indeed, those who affirm *perfectionist* liberalism explicitly insist that their type of liberalism is value-laden with a thick description of the virtues and ideals that are appropriate for liberals (Raz 1986). With his recognition of the burdens of judgment, discussed above, John Rawls decided that his effort to argue for his particular version of comprehensive liberalism was not likely to convince those committed to other versions and that, in any case, agreement on a particular comprehensive doctrine of liberalism was not necessary or even desirable in order for liberalism to accomplish its main political task.

So Rawls argued for *political* liberalism: “the problem of political liberalism is: How is it possible that there may exist over time a stable and just society of free and equal citizens profoundly divided by reasonable though incompatible religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines?” (Rawls 1996: 20). This way of stating the problem seems to make it a prudential question of how to maintain stability, but Rawls makes it clear in the introduction he added to the paperback edition that it is not simply a pragmatic *modus vivendi* he is looking for, it is stability for the right reasons. The latter requires that compatriots respect each other by providing the right sort of justification for their proposals for coercive legislation (Rawls 1996: xli–xliv). The crucial and controversial element of this civic respect (recognition respect of the rights of compatriots) is that conscientious citizens should restrain themselves from using sectarian arguments in the public square unless they can back them up with public reasons. An explanation of this restraint principle requires a few definitions.

The *public square* refers to those locations and forums where one votes or advocates for political candidates, for legislation, or for any public policy that would result in the right of government to use coercion to control the behavior of its citizens. The public square can be contrasted with the “background culture” of a society—the religious, educational, and cultural institutions, including the media, the journals, the magazines, the sermons, the entertainment industry, and all those venues in society where, among other things, we try to *explain* our views and also try to *influence* opinions and behavior through persuasion, advertising, and so on. Obviously, the contrast here is not between public and private *realms*, but between *aims*, in particular, the extent to which one’s aim is to promote particular candidates or legislation. A general version of “the restraint principle” is that conscientious citizens ought to restrain themselves from using non-public reasons to advocate or vote for at least some coercive legislation unless they also are willing and able to provide public reasons for it. This principle comes in many variations; for example, some apply it mainly or only to advocacy, and less or not at all to voting; some apply it to all citizens while others apply it only or mainly to public officials, and others draw the line between executives and judges, on the one hand, and legislators and ordinary citizens, on the other; some restrict it to constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice, while others apply it to all coercive legislation; some propose restraint on theological (non-secular) reasons but not on controversial secular reasons, while others propose restraint on all controversial doctrines. In any case, all agree that the proposed restriction is a moral and internal restraint, not a legal and external one. Also, most versions of the restraint principle are not calls to privatize distinctive doctrines; in what is called the “wide” or “inclusive” version one is welcome to appeal to distinctive religious and moral doctrines in the public square, as Martin Luther King did in quoting the Hebrew prophets, as long as one is willing and able to provide public reasons for the legislation or legislator that one favors.

Public reasons, according to Rawls, are those that advocates in the public square can reasonably expect their compatriots could reasonably accept (Rawls 1996: xlv). They need not be reasons that compatriots *actually* accept, since the latter might make mistakes about the implications of their own views. And since the range of reasons one could reasonably accept is wider than the range of reasons one cannot reasonably reject, it is important to see that most political liberals phrase the restraint principle in the wider sense. Of course, if I think that I am reasonable, there is a sense in which I think that anyone could reasonably accept almost any of my own beliefs, which is why the restraint principle must be understood as applying to my compatriots *given* their

reasonable but distinctive and conflicting moral and religious views, which are their comprehensive doctrines. As Rawls puts it, we must be able in a sincere and non-manipulative way to conjecture that our compatriots' reasonable comprehensive doctrines allow them to endorse the public reasons we offer, even if, in fact, they reject them (Rawls 1996: 156).

The actual content of public reason includes not only the well-established claims of the empirical sciences and mathematics and logic, but also normative beliefs that have become part of the public culture: "We collect such settled convictions as the belief in religious toleration and the rejection of slavery and try to organize the basic ideas and principles implicit in the convictions into a coherent political conception of justice" (Rawls 1996: 8). This "reasonable overlapping consensus" might be regarded as true by one or more comprehensive doctrines, but it can also be formulated as "a freestanding political conception having its own intrinsic (moral) political ideal expressed by the criterion of reciprocity" (Rawls 1996: xlvii). In his final publication on public reason, Rawls says its content includes a rather fluid *family* of political conceptions of justice that might include "Catholic views of the common good and solidarity" (Rawls 1999: 142).

One reason for advocating the restraint principle takes a lesson from the religious wars and argues that the stability of a pluralistic democracy demands that we not allow sectarian views that lack an overlapping consensus to be encoded into law. Critics of this argument can admit that there might be times and places where sectarian views should be avoided in politics, but that in pluralistic democracies such as the United States people are used to addressing each other politically with very controversial views without worries about violence. Moreover, such critics have argued that discounting the distinctive views of believers who integrate their theology with their politics is itself a recipe for significant alienation and resentment. In any case, the main argument that political liberals use for the restraint principle is not a prudential one about avoiding divisiveness and violence; it is a moral one about how compatriots should respect each other as they debate legislation in the public square. Civic virtue involves acceptance of reciprocity, which means that to respect our compatriots as free and equal is to refuse to coerce them with particular laws unless one can give them reasons that one reasonably believes they can not only *understand* (as Servetus could understand Calvin's reasons for executing him) but also reasons that one reasonably believes they could reasonably *accept* whatever their reasonable comprehensive doctrine might be.

Some theists embrace this feature of political liberalism (Dombrowski 2001: 21), sometimes giving reasons to believe a theistic God would see to it that people share enough public reason to shape good legislation (Audi 2000: 124–30). Other theists reject it (Wolterstorff 1997), though sometimes suggesting compromises with or modifications of it (Eberle 2002; Weithman 2002). These theists tend to argue that true reasonableness requires that we respect each other in our particularity, and we do this only if we give each other our true reasons for our political decisions, including our distinctive moral and religious ones. Sometimes called the "consocial" view or—at its radically inclusive extreme—the "agonistic" view (from the Greek *agon*, meaning both "assembly" and "contest"), it advocates frank and full public square discussions of all our differences. After vigorous debate, rather than appeal to a non-existent consensus or convergence, we should simply vote and expect the minority respectfully to acquiesce without undue resentment, given that their distinctive views were not automatically discounted as illegitimate and that constitutional safeguards protect their basic rights against ill-considered majority decisions.

One proposal for compromise is to make appeal to public reasons a principle of *pursuit* rather than *restraint* (Eberle 2002: 84–108); respect for compatriots requires that one sincerely try to find public reasons for one's favored legislation. But if one cannot find them, then one might simply appeal to one's distinctive convictions. If political liberals are right in thinking that there are ample public reasons available for political debate, the practical results of the pursuit and the restraint principles would largely overlap. In any case, what causes the most offense to political liberals is the insistence by some believers that they have no obligation even to try to find reasons that engage those who do not share their beliefs, relying simply on what they believe God is telling them. Another proposal for compromise is to emphasize that the restraint principle is a *prima facie* obligation and to make explicit the sort of considerations relevant to whether the obligation is overridden (Langerak 2012).

Summary

Theism, especially in its monotheistic form, has a long history of debate about how it should engage civil society. When civil society is understood to be non-governmental associations, theists can respect some views that contradict their own as reasonable and rationally justified, even if wrong. When civil society is understood to include the state and government, with its right to use coercion, the question of tolerating what is seen as error arises. Theists have both moral and theological reasons for tolerating the propagation of error and its expression in actions, depending on the moral features and consequences of tolerating or not tolerating it. Theists are divided on political liberalism and its restraint principle, which demands public reasons when debating legislation in the public square.

Related Topics

Chapter 30: Arguments about Human Persons; Chapter 32: Human Rights; Chapter 34: Law; Chapter 36: Religious Diversity; Chapter 37: Globalization

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Recommended Reading

- Langerak, E. (2012) *Civil Disagreement: Personal Integrity in a Pluralistic Society*, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press. Elaborates on many of the themes in this chapter.
- Niebuhr, H. R. (1951) *Christ and Culture*, New York: Harper and Row. The classic overview of ways that Christian theism relates to civil society.
- Rawls, J. (1996) *Political Liberalism*, New York: Columbia University Press. The central text for political liberalism.
- Weithman, P. (2010) *Why Political Liberalism?: On John Rawls's Political Turn*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. The leading Rawls scholar explains the issues involved in political liberalism.

HUMAN RIGHTS

*Michael J. Perry***Is There a Basis for Human Rights?**

“All human beings . . . should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” So says Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). But *why*? What reason or reasons do we—“all human beings”—have for “act[ing] towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood”?

A principal way for us to “act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood” is for us to try to get not just our own government but every government to treat its citizens and others with whom it deals “in a spirit of brotherhood.” What reason or reasons do we, the citizens of one country, have for making it our business how the government of every other country treats its citizens and others?

Before the Second World War, it was no part of the proper business of the government of one country, insofar as international law was concerned, how the government of another country treated its citizens: “Until World War II, most legal scholars and governments affirmed the general proposition, albeit not in so many words, that international law did not impede the natural right of each equal sovereign to be monstrous to his or her subjects” (Farer and Gaer 1993: 240). Today, by contrast, it is a matter of international concern—as the UDHR, various human rights treaties, regional as well as international, and the recent emergence of the International Criminal Court all make abundantly clear—that no government treat its citizens, or any other human beings with whom it deals, “monstrously.”

We obviously have good reason to concern ourselves with how our own government treats us, its citizens. But what reason or reasons warrant our concern that no government abuse its citizens or others with whom it deals; what reason or reasons warrant our trying to get every government to treat its citizens and others with whom it deals “in a spirit of brotherhood”? In particular, what reason or reasons do we have for trying to get certain rights—certain rights *against government*, against *every* government—established and protected?

Let us consider three responses, beginning with a response articulated—the principal response articulated—in the three principal components of the International Bill of Human Rights: the UDHR, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

“Inherent Dignity” and “Inviolability”

The UDHR refers, in its preamble, to “the inherent dignity . . . of all members of the human family” and states, in Article 1, that “[a]ll human beings are born free and equal in dignity . . . and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” The ICCPR and the ICESCR each refer, in their preambles, to “the inherent dignity . . . of all members of the human family” and to “the inherent dignity of the human person”—from which, both covenants declare, “the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family . . . derive.” Moreover, in 1986, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution—A/RES/41/120, titled “Setting International Standards in the Field of Human Rights”—according to which international human rights treaties should not designate a right as a human right unless the right is, *inter alia*, “of fundamental character and derive[s] from the inherent dignity and worth of the human person.” In 1993, the UN-sponsored World Conference on Human Rights adopted the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, which includes this language in its preamble: “Recognizing and affirming that all human rights derive from the dignity and worth inherent in the human person.”

The International Bill’s statement of what, according to it, is the fundamental ground of human rights is compressed and needs unpacking and clarification. We can articulate that ground as this twofold claim: “Each and every (born) human being (1) has equal inherent dignity and (2) is inviolable: not-to-be-violated.”

What does it mean to say that every human being has equal inherent dignity? The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives this as the principal definition of “dignity”: “The quality of being worthy or honourable; worthiness, worth, nobleness, excellence.” That every human being has “inherent” dignity is the International Bill’s way of saying that the dignity that every human being has, she has not as a member of one or another group (racial, ethnic, national, religious, and so on), not as a man or a woman, not as someone who has done or achieved something, and so on, but simply as a human being. To say that every human being has “equal” inherent dignity is to say that no human being has more—or less—inherent dignity than another human being: “All human beings are . . . equal in dignity.” Hereafter, when I say “inherent dignity,” I mean “equal inherent dignity.”

What does it mean to say that every human being is inviolable? To say that every human being is inviolable—to say, that is, that every human being is not-to-be-violated—is to say that we should never violate any human being; instead, we should always respect every human being. Or, as the UDHR puts it, we “should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” We *violate* a human being, in the relevant sense of “violate,” when we fail to “act towards [him or her] in a spirit of brotherhood.” We *respect* a human being when we do “act towards [him or her] in a spirit of brotherhood.”

According to the text of the International Bill, quoted above, human rights “derive” from the inherent dignity and inviolability of every human being. What is the “derivation”? Because we should never violate human beings but always respect them, we should do what we reasonably can, all things considered, both to prevent certain hurtful things from being done to human beings, whether to all human beings or just to some (children, for instance), and to require that certain helpful things be done for human beings, whether for all human beings or just for some (for example, the disabled). Therefore, and in particular, we should do what we reasonably can to get certain rights—certain rules of conduct—established and protected. If we refuse to do what we

reasonably can (all things considered) both to prevent certain hurtful things from being done to human beings and to require that certain helpful things be done for human beings, then we do not respect those human beings—we do not “act towards [them] in a spirit of brotherhood”—but, instead, we violate them.

What rights should we—“all human beings”—do what we reasonably can to get established and protected? That is: What hurtful things should we do what we reasonably can to prevent from being done to human beings? What helpful things should we do what we reasonably can to require be done for human beings?

In the context of the UDHR and human rights treaties, both regional and international, the fundamental concern is rights *against government*. In that context, the answer to the question posed in the preceding paragraph is: those hurtful things the doing of which by government, and those helpful things the not doing of which by government, we judge to be failures by government to act towards its citizens and/or others with whom it deals “in a spirit of brotherhood.”

The large majority of the nations of the world agree about what many of the “doings” and “not doings” by government are that constitute failures by government to act towards its citizens and/or others with whom it deals in a “spirit of brotherhood.” The large majority of nations also agree, therefore, about what many of the rights are that should be established and protected as international human rights: the rights listed in the UDHR and in those human rights treaties to which the large majority of nations are parties.

These three linked passages are prologue to an important, difficult question about the twofold claim that every human being has inherent dignity and is inviolable:

The masses blink and say: “We are all equal. – Man is but man, before God – we are all equal.” Before God! But now this God has died.

(Friedrich Nietzsche, quoted in Grant 1985: 77)

Nietzsche’s thought[:] there is not only no God, but no metaphysical order of any kind

(Bernard Williams, in Williams 1990: 48)

Few contemporary moral philosophers . . . have really joined battle with Nietzsche about morality. By and large we have just gone on taking moral judgments for granted as if nothing had happened. We, the philosopher watchdogs, have mostly failed to bark

(Philippa Foot, in Foot 2001: 103)

The dignity and inviolability claims cohere well with some religious worldviews. (As Charles Taylor has explained: “[The] affirmation of universal human rights [that characterizes] modern liberal political culture [represents an] authentic development of the gospel” (Taylor 1999: 16).) But do they also cohere, well or otherwise, with any secular worldview: any worldview that denies or is agnostic about the existence of a “transcendent” reality, as distinct from the reality that is or could be the object of natural-scientific inquiry? Put another way: Are secular worldviews and the dignity and inviolability claims like oil and water? Do the claims “mix” with a worldview such as Bertrand Russell’s?

That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his

beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labor of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so certain that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.

(Russell 1917: 47–8)

If every human being has inherent dignity, why does every human being have it?

The claim that every human being has inherent dignity is controversial: Not everyone believes that every human being has inherent dignity. Moreover, even among those who *do* believe it, not everyone gives the same answer to this question: *Why—in virtue of what*—does every human being have inherent dignity?

A religious believer might give one or another religious answer. For example, a religious believer might say: “Every human being is created in the image of God.” Or she might say: “Every human being is sacred: speaking analogically, every human being is a beloved child of God and a sister/brother to oneself” (see Perry 2007: 7–13; 2010: 29–44). Charles Curran points out that according to Roman Catholic social teaching:

Human dignity comes from God's free gift; it does not depend on human effort, work, or accomplishments. All human beings have a fundamental, equal dignity because all share the generous gift of creation and redemption from God. . . . Consequently, all human beings have the same fundamental dignity, whether they are brown, black, red, or white; rich or poor, young or old; male or female; healthy or sick.

(Curran 2002: 132)

And as the philosopher Hilary Putnam has noted, the moral image central to what he calls the Jerusalem-based religions “stress[es] equality and also fraternity, as in the metaphor of the whole human race as One Family, of all women and men as sisters and brothers” (Putnam 1987: 60–1).

In an essay on “The Spirituality of the Talmud,” Ben Zion Bokser and Baruch M. Bokser state:

From this conception of man's place in the universe comes the sense of the supreme sanctity of all human life. “He who destroys one person has dealt a blow at the entire universe, and he who sustains or saves one person has sustained the whole world.”

(Bokser and Bokser 1989: 7)

They continue:

The sanctity of life is not a function of national origin, religious affiliation, or social status. In the sight of God, the humble citizen is the equal of the person who occupies the highest office. As one talmudist put it: "Heaven and earth I call to witness, whether it be an Israelite or pagan, man or woman, slave or maidservant, according to the work of every human being doth the Holy Spirit rest upon him." . . . As the rabbis put it: "We are obligated to feed non-Jews residing among us even as we feed Jews; we are obligated to visit their sick even as we visit the Jewish sick; we are obligated to attend to the burial of their dead even as we attend to the burial of the Jewish dead."

(Bokser and Bokser 1989: 30–1)

A non-believer, by contrast, might give one or another secular (non-religious) answer, such as: "Every human being, or virtually every human being, has, or at a later stage of life will have, the wondrous human capacities to love, to reason, to imagine, and the like." Listen, for example, to philosopher James Griffin:

Human life is different from the life of other animals. We human beings have a conception of ourselves and of our past and future. We reflect and assess. We form pictures of what a good life would be—often, it is true, only on a small scale, but occasionally also on a large scale. And we try to realize these pictures. This is what we mean by a distinctively *human* existence—distinctive so far as we know. . . . Human rights can be seen as protections of our human standing or . . . our personhood.

(Griffin 2008: 32–3)

Of course, any religious answer to "Why does every human being have inherent dignity?" will be controversial, not only as between religious believers and non-believers, but also as among religious believers of different stripes. But every secular answer with which I am familiar is controversial too, not only as between religious believers and non-believers, but also as among secular thinkers of different stripes.

Moreover, it is open to serious question whether any secular worldview has the resources needed to warrant the claim that *all* human beings—even infants and the severely mentally disabled—have inherent dignity (see Gaita 2000; Perry 2007: 14–29; 2008; 2010: 45–57; Wolterstorff 2007, 2009; Dobard 2010; but cf. Kohn 2007). According to Griffin, neither infants nor the severely mentally disabled can have human rights because they do not have a conception of themselves and of their past and future, they do not reflect and assess, they do not form pictures of what a good life would be (for critical commentary on this aspect of Griffin's position, see Platts 2010: 319 and Cruft 2010: 178–9).

If every human being is inviolable, why is every human being inviolable?

Again, the fundamental warrant for the international human rights articulated in the International Bill of Human Rights and elsewhere begins with a twofold claim. The first claim—the dignity claim—is about the status of every (born) human being: *Every human being has inherent dignity*. The second claim—the inviolability claim—is about the normative force that the inherent dignity that every human being has, has for us: *Every human being is inviolable: not-to-be-violated*. According to the inviolability claim,

we should never violate any human being; instead, we should always respect every human being. In the words of the UDHR, we “should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”

The inviolability claim, like the dignity claim, is controversial. Just as not everyone believes that every human being has inherent dignity, not everyone believes that every human being is inviolable. Indeed, it might be the case that one does not believe that every human being is inviolable *because* one does not believe that every human being has inherent dignity. But even if we assume for the sake of discussion that every human being has inherent dignity, why should we think—why should we conclude—that we should never violate any human being? Why should we think, that is, that we should live our lives in such a way as never to violate any human being? We can imagine someone saying—and indeed we don’t have to try very hard to imagine someone saying: “Okay, I’ll assume that every human being has inherent dignity. So what? What is that to me? Why should I care?” It is not enough to say, in response: “Because every human being has inherent dignity.” It is not obvious, even if we assume that every human being has inherent dignity, why we should conclude that we should never violate any human being. One or more premises are missing. The (assumed) truth of the dignity claim does not entail the truth of the inviolability claim.

A religious believer might give one or another religious answer. An adherent to one of the Jerusalem-based religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) might say something to this effect: The perfection for which God created us, the true happiness (*eudaimonia*) that is our ultimate end, consists, in part, in discerning—in our hearts, so to speak, if not also in our minds—the Other (i.e., every “other,” every human being) as sacred—as a beloved child of God and a sister/brother to oneself—and in loving the Other. To love the Other—love not in the sense of *eros* or *philia* but of *agape*—is never to violate but always to respect the Other (see Perry 2007: 29–44). The assumption here is that we are committed to achieving our true happiness, even though we might, and usually do, disagree with one another—sometimes radically so—about what our true happiness consists in.

If one self-identifies as religious or spiritual but “not a theist,” perhaps because one is wary of God-talk (for a discussion of Christians who are wary of God-talk, see McGinn 1986: 15)—if one is a Buddhist, for example, one might say something to this effect: The human perfection that is sometimes called “enlightenment” consists, in part, in discerning the transcendent truth that the Other is infinitely precious and in acting toward the Other in accord with that discernment, namely, with compassion (see Hanh 2001; King 2012). For the Buddhist, that discernment is a constituent of wisdom (*prajna*) and that action—which is the *practical* (as in “praxis”) yield of the discernment—is compassion (*karuna*).

The question, again, is why, even assuming that every human being has inherent dignity, we should think that we should never violate any human being but, instead, always respect every human being. Even if one rejects any religious answer as implausible, as of course anyone will who rejects any and all religious worldviews as implausible, the question remains whether there is any satisfactory secular answer to the question—any satisfactory secular equivalent of, or alternative to, a religious answer of the sort articulated in the preceding paragraph. That a proposition coheres with—that it mixes with, that it “makes sense,” that it is “intelligible,” in the context of a religious worldview does not entail that the proposition also coheres with any secular worldview. The inviolability claim—according to which we, every one of us,

should live our lives in such a way as never to violate *any* human being but always to respect *every* human being—coheres with some religious worldviews. It is open to serious question, however, whether the claim coheres with any secular worldview. As Charles Taylor has put the point:

The logic of the subtraction story is something like this: Once we slough off our concern with serving God, or attending to any other transcendent reality, what we're left with is human good, and that is what modern societies are concerned with. But this radically under-describes what I'm calling modern humanism. That I am left with only human concerns doesn't tell me to take universal human welfare as my goal; nor does it tell me that freedom is important, or fulfillment, or equality. Just being confined to human goods could just as well find expression in my concerning myself exclusively with my own material welfare, or that of my family or immediate milieu. The, in fact, very exigent demands of universal justice and benevolence which characterize modern humanism can't be explained just by the subtraction of earlier goals and allegiances.

(Taylor 2003: 61; cf. Joyce 2008: 51)

That the International Bill of Human Rights is silent—that it is agnostic, so to speak—both about *why* every human being has inherent dignity and about *why* we should never violate any human being—about *why* we “should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood”—is not surprising, given the plurality of religious and non-religious views that existed among those who bequeathed us the International Bill. Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain, who was a drafter of the UDHR, said of himself and the other drafters that “we agree about the rights but on condition that no one asks us why” (Maritain 1949: 9; cf. Glendon 2001: 73–8). However, there was agreement among those who drafted the UDHR not only about “the rights” but also about the fundamental justification of—the fundamental warrant for—the rights, namely, that every human being has inherent dignity and we should never violate any human being. Again, the UDHR explicitly refers to “the inherent dignity . . . of all members of the human family” and states that “[a]ll human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights . . . and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” So the comment quoted by Maritain should have been stated thus: “Yes, we agree not only about the rights but also about the fundamental warrant for the rights. But our agreement is no deeper than that: We do not agree about *why* every human being has inherent dignity or about *why* we should never violate any human being.”

The Altruistic Perspective

Let us return to the inquiry that is the point of departure for this chapter: What reason or reasons warrant our concern that no government abuse its citizens or others with whom it deals? What reason or reasons warrant our trying to get every government to treat its citizens and others with whom it deals “in a spirit of brotherhood”? In particular, what reason or reasons do we have for trying to get certain rights—certain rights *against government*, against *every* government—established and protected?

Let us now consider a second response, one that, unlike the first response, does not depend on any religious or metaphysical premises. Imagine a statement along these lines:

I detest and oppose states of affairs in which human beings—any human beings, not just ourselves and those for whom we happen to have special affection, such as family, friends, and fellow countrymen—suffer grievously in consequence of laws and other policies that are misguided or worse. I detest and oppose such states of affairs, because I detest and oppose such suffering. And so I work to build a world in which such suffering is, over time, diminished.

Is such an orientation in the world—which we might call altruism—sufficiently widespread, robust, and durable to keep human rights “afloat,” in the words of Nobel poet Czeslaw Milosz, “if the [religious] bottom is taken out”?

What has been surprising in the post-Cold War period are those beautiful and deeply moving words pronounced with veneration in places like Prague and Warsaw, words which pertain to the old repertory of the rights of man and the dignity of the person.

I wonder at this phenomenon because maybe underneath there is an abyss. After all, those ideas had their foundation in religion, and I am not over-optimistic as to the survival of religion in a scientific-technological civilization. Notions that seemed buried forever have suddenly been resurrected. But how long can they stay afloat if the bottom is taken out?

(Milosz 1997: 32)

Consider in connection with Milosz’s worry, the following two statements by Jurgen Habermas (who is not a religious believer):

Among the modern societies, only those that are able to introduce into the secular domain the essential contents of their religious traditions which point beyond the merely human realm will also be able to rescue the substance of the human.

(Quoted in Reder and Schmidt 2010: 5)

Christianity has functioned for the normative self-understanding of modernity as more than a mere precursor or a catalyst. Equalitarian universalism, from which sprang the ideas of freedom and social solidarity, of an autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, of the individual morality of conscience, human rights, and democracy, is the direct heir to the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of continual critical appropriation and reinterpretation. To this day, there is no alternative to it. And in light of the current challenges of the postnational constellation, we continue to draw on the substance of this heritage. Everything else is just idle postmodern talk.

(Habermas 2006: 150–1)

Whatever the answer to the question that precedes the Milosz quote, I can discern nothing in our historical experience to suggest that altruism—which may be wedded to religious faith (see Mahoney 2010: 677) but certainly need not be (see Monroe 1996)—is any less widespread, robust, and durable a basis for keeping human rights “afloat” than religion has been.

With altruism now in view, look again at the UDHR’s reference, in its preamble, to “the inherent dignity . . . of all members of the human family” and its statement, in Article 1, that “[a]ll human beings are born free and equal in dignity . . . and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” Although that language obviously can be read as asserting a truth about human beings—that they have inherent dignity—must it be so read? Can’t it also be read simply as expressing—in what philosopher Hilary Putnam has called “the metaphor of the whole human race as One Family, of all women and men as sisters and brothers” (Putnam 1987: 60–1)—what Kristen Renwick Monroe has called “the altruistic perspective”:

[I]t is the [altruistic] perspective itself that constitutes the heart of altruism. Without this particular perspective, there are no altruists [The perspective] consists of a common perception, held by all altruists, that they are strongly linked to others through a shared humanity. This self-perception constitutes such a central core to altruists’ identity that it leaves them with no choice in their behavior toward others. They are John Donne’s people. All life concerns them. Any death diminishes them. Because they are a part of mankind.

(Monroe 1996: 216)

Even if the answer to the question posed in the preceding paragraph—the question whether the Article 1 language can be read simply as expressing “the altruistic perspective”—is yes, the problem of “justification” persists: the justification of the altruistic perspective. Listen, for example, to Leszek Kolakowski:

When Pierre Bayle argued that morality does not depend on religion, he was speaking mainly of psychological independence; he pointed out that atheists are capable of achieving the highest moral standards . . . and of putting to shame most of the faithful Christians. That is obviously true as far as it goes, but this matter-of-fact argument leaves the question of validity intact.

(Kolakowski 1982: 191)

Listen, too, to John Rist: “Although a ‘moral saint’ may exist without realist (and therefore religious) beliefs, yet his stance as a moral saint cannot be justified without recourse to realism” (Rist 2002: 267).

To the demand for justification, the altruist—especially the altruist who is not religiously or metaphysically engaged—may respond:

Again, I detest and oppose states of affairs in which any human beings suffer grievously in consequence of laws and other policies that are misguided or worse. You ask what “justifies” my altruism—if indeed anything justifies it. But for me that sensibility is where, in Wittgenstein’s words (2009 [1953]: § 217),

"I have reached bedrock and my spade is turned." This is simply how I am wired—and how I am deeply content to be wired. Moreover, there is much to be done, and life is short. So I work to build a world in which such suffering is, over time, diminished. And I work to build that world with anyone who will work with me, whatever their particular perspective or motivation.

Self-Interest

Consider, as a third and final response to the inquiry that is the point of departure for this chapter, self-interest—self-interest generously conceived, as concern not only for one's own wellbeing but also for the wellbeing of others for whom one cares, such as family and friends.

The Charter of the United Nations states, in Article 55(3), that

[w]ith a view to the creation of conditions of stability and well-being which are necessary for peaceful and friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, the United Nations shall promote . . . universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.

The UDHR, the ICCPR, and the ICESCR all state, in their preambles, that "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of . . . peace in the world." The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, adopted in 1993 by the World Conference on Human Rights, states in paragraph 6 that

[t]he efforts of the United Nations system towards the universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedom for all, contribute to the stability and well-being necessary for peaceful and friendly relations among nations, and to improved conditions for peace and security . . . in conformity with the Charter of the United Nations.

In 1993, at the World Conference on Human Rights, U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher argued that "[a] world of democracies would be a safer world":

States that respect human rights and operate on democratic principles tend to be the world's most peaceful and stable. On the other hand, the worst violators of human rights tend to be the world's aggressors and proliferators. These states export threats to global security, whether in the shape of terrorism, massive refugee flows, or environmental pollution. Denying human rights not only lays waste to human lives; it creates instability that travels across borders.

(Christopher 1993: 442)

In 2002, William Schulz, at the time the Executive Director of Amnesty International USA, echoed Christopher's argument—and, not surprisingly, invoked the example of 9/11:

Respect for human rights both in the United States and abroad has implications for our welfare far beyond the maintenance of our ethical integrity. Ignoring the fates of human rights victims almost anywhere invariably makes the world—our world—a more dangerous place. If we learned nothing else from the horrific events of September 11, [2001] perhaps we learned that.

(Shulz 2002: xix; see also Burke-White 2004; Brysk 2009; 2010; Byers 2010–11)

However, some remain skeptical of the idea that self-interest can serve as a basis of human rights. Thus, Richard B. Bilder, writes that “[self-interested rationales are] hard to prove and not fully persuasive. Despite considerable effort, it has been difficult to construct a wholly convincing ‘selfish’ rationale for major U.S. national commitments to promote the human rights of foreigners” (Bilder 1974: 608).

Conclusion

Again: We obviously have good reason to concern ourselves with how our own government treats us, its citizens. But what reason or reasons warrant our concern that no government abuse its citizens or others with whom it deals; what reason or reasons warrant our trying to get every government to treat its citizens and others with whom it deals “in a spirit of brotherhood?” In particular, what reason or reasons do we have for trying to get certain rights—certain rights *against government*, against *every* government—established and protected? In short, what are the grounds of human rights?

In this chapter, we have considered three responses, three answers to the question about the grounds of human rights: (1) the claim, which for some is a religiously based claim, that every human being has inherent dignity and is inviolable; (2) the altruistic perspective; and (3) self-interest.

Not all three responses work for everyone. Indeed, there are some for whom none of the responses work. But there are also some for whom each response works, for whom each response is, by itself, an adequate ground of human rights: those who are in the grip of the altruistic perspective and who would be in the grip of that perspective—who would be altruists—even if they did not affirm, but who as it happens do affirm, that every human being has inherent dignity and is inviolable, and who, moreover, believe that even by itself self-interest warrants our concern that every government act towards its citizens and others “in a spirit of brotherhood.”

Related Topics

Chapter 25: Moral Inquiry; Chapter 30: Arguments about Human Persons; Chapter 31: Civil Society; Chapter 33: War; Chapter 34: Law; Chapter 36: Religious Diversity; Chapter 37: Globalization; Chapter 48: Community

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Recommended Reading

- Brysk, A. (2009) *Global Good Samaritans: Human Rights as Foreign Policy*, New York: Oxford University Press. The author tells us why, in her judgment, a country's long-term interests, correctly understood, support a country's sometimes costly efforts to protect the human rights of persons in distant lands.
- Byers, D. (2010) "The Morality of Human Rights: A Secular Ground," *Journal of Law and Religion* 26: 1–42. This essay is an especially thoughtful effort by a religious believer to provide a non-religious ground of human rights.
- de Waal, F. (2010) "Morals without God?," *New York Times*, October 17. One of the world's premier primatologists tells us what he's been learning about morality from the non-human primates that he studies.
- Gaita, R. (2000) *A Common Humanity: Thinking About Love and Truth and Justice*, London: Routledge. An Australian philosopher's humane meditation on morality in the absence of religion.
- Griffin, J. (2008) *On Human Rights*, London: Oxford University Press. One of the most commented on works in contemporary human rights theory, by a British philosopher whose perspective is resolutely secular. A related work (2010) "Symposium on James Griffin's *On Human Rights*," *Ethics* 120: 647–760. Three philosophers comment critically on, and James Griffin defends, Griffin's *On Human Rights*.
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- Monroe, K. (1996) *The Heart of Altruism: Perception of a Common Humanity*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. A now-classic elaboration of the altruistic perspective.

- Ruston, R. (2004) *Human Rights and the Image of God*, London: SCM Press. A scholarly reflection on the relationship between the biblical idea of human beings created “in the image of God” and the idea of human rights.
- Schultz, W. (2002) *Our Own Best Interests: How Defending Human Rights Benefits Us All*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press. A former executive director of Amnesty International USA argues that enlightened self-interest supports a foreign policy that takes seriously the human rights of persons in distant lands.
- Wolterstorff, N. (2007) *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. A formidable elaboration and defense of human rights from a resolutely religious perspective, explaining why, in the author’s judgment, non-religious worldviews are inadequate to ground human rights. For a shorter version: Wolterstorff, N. (2009) “Can Human Rights Survive Secularization?” *Villanova Law Review* 54: 411–20.

WAR

Asa Kasher

Roswell Dwight Hitchcock was a professor of church history at the Union Theological Seminary in New York. In 1871 he published *Hitchcock's New and Complete Analysis of the Holy Bible: Or, the Whole of the Old and New Testaments Arranged According to Subjects in Twenty-seven Books*. The idea was not novel, but the scholarly standards were the highest. Each of the books included all the verses the major subject of which belongs to the topic of the book, be it *Scripture*, *God*, or *Miracles*, but also *The Family* as well as *War*. The latter book is larger than all the former and is one of the largest of the entire volume. Only *Jesus Christ*, *Civil and Social Life*, and *Man Redeemed* are somewhat larger. The whole book is dedicated by the editor "to all, of whatever name, who desire a better knowledge of God's word." The emerging lesson is clear and probably surprising: For a better knowledge of God's words, as manifested in the scriptures of two major theistic religions, Judaism and Christianity, one has to become familiar with numerous aspects of war that are depicted in these scriptures, such as *God's Hand in War*, *Military Organization*, *Strategy*, and *Tactics*, as well as *Victory and Pursuit* and *Mishaps and Casualties*, all of which are titles of chapters in the book *War*.

Given a religious tradition in which its scriptures are usually held to be divine expressions of its tradition of theism, it seems natural to study any aspect of human life that is conspicuous in these scriptures, in order to understand the role that aspect of human life plays in the scriptures and the ensuing traditions of interpretation and practice. The present chapter will outline major areas of such studies of the role of war within religious traditions that rest on traditional conceptions of theism.

At the present stage, three preliminary clarifications seem to be required. First, the present chapter is conceptual in nature. It will present and discuss notions, ideas, theories, and doctrines related to war rather than actual wars that were waged or are still taking place. Thus, our discussions will be of a theological or philosophical nature, not historical in any systematic sense. Usage of texts will not be meant as an historical portrayal of a point under consideration but only as an illumination of it.

Second, we are not going to delineate the family of wars under consideration in any strict way. Twentieth-century philosophy of language has taught us that natural terms, such as *game*, *love*, *people*, or *religion*, that for a long time have been used in a natural language under a variety of circumstances cannot be characterized by means of any necessary and sufficient condition. Instead such terms can be characterized by pointing to a group of features some of which but not necessarily all hold for every entity to which the term refers. Features of *religion* include *a conception of deity*, *scriptures*, *rituals*, *sites of worship*, *times of worship*, *saints or sages*, *civil practices*, among others. Some religions resemble each other since they share sufficiently many though not all of the features.

War is also a term that can be characterized by pointing to a group of features that create the family of wars and are constitutive of the family resemblance between different wars. Here are some of the features of *war*:

- a state of affairs
- opponents
- incompatible goals
- conflict
- hostility
- attitude
- struggle
- combat
- violence
- leadership
- military force
- organization
- victory
- casualties
- calamities.

Such a group of features results in a broad delineation of the family of wars. It includes wars that are not “international armed conflicts,” as defined by international law convention documents. When no combat is taking place or is even imminent or under planning, still the state of affairs can be depicted as a state of war if a party to the conflict nurtures an attitude of willingness to use force, including violence, if under circumstances of conflict that would seem appropriate. It was Hobbes in his *Leviathan* who pointed out that attitude in the context of delineating *war*. Notice also that civil wars, guerrilla warfare and terrorist organization activities belong to the family of wars here delineated. Not excluded are meanings ascribed to the Arabic term *Jihad* in Islam, such as holy war and also non-violent Muslim struggle. Notions that are often taken to be metaphorical, such as *war on drugs*, are also here understood as directly related to elements of genuine *war*.

Third, a systematic study of the role played by war in a theistic tradition should not ignore the natural embedding of *war* in the broader framework of *war and peace*. A series of verses in the book of Ecclesiastes enumerates pairs of times that stand for states of affairs involving actions, under the title of the first verse: “To every thing there is a season and a time to every purpose under the heaven” (3:1). On a par with pairs such as “a time to cast away stones and a time to gather stones together” (3:5), and “a time to love and a time to hate” (3:8), we have the last pair “a time of war and a time of peace” (3:8). The members of each pair in these verses are, on some level, incompatible with each other. Studying one of them is, in a way, studying the absence of the other. The study of war is the study of what replaces peace and results in what peace naturally avoids. The study of peace is often the study of how to eliminate from human life all forms of violence that reflect conflict, including war. The study of the relationship of theism with either war or peace is, therefore, actually, the study of the relationships between theism and both war and peace.

Attributes and Titles of God and War

The strongest possible relationship between theism and war would be an essential relationship between the nature of God and a related divine involvement in warfare. Views about the nature of God abound in religious scriptures and traditions, as well as in theological frameworks and philosophical discussions. The theoretical scale of relationships between such views of God's nature and war ranges from (a) views according to which God is a warrior, through (b) views about God's nature that are merely compatible with the possibility of divine involvement in warfare, to (c) views about God's nature that are incompatible with the possibility of any divine involvement in martial activities.

Views of the nature of God are presented in some religious traditions by means of usage and enumeration of attributes and titles of God. The title of being a warrior and related ones are found in these theistic traditions. In the *Song of the Sea* which Moses and the Children of Israel sang, after they had safely crossed the sea whereas the Egyptian chariots had drowned in it, they praised God by saying (Exodus 15:3): "The Lord is a man of war," to use the literal wording of the 1769 King James Authorized Version of the Bible (which will be used hereafter every time we are going to quote a translation of a biblical verse), or rather "God is the master of war," to use classical commentaries of that verse. The evidence is clear, simply put in the next verse: "Pharaoh's chariots and army he [i.e. God] cast in the sea, his very best officers were drowned in the Red Sea."

Islam has enumerated attributes and titles of God. "He is Allah," says a verse of Qur'an, "to him belong the most beautiful names" (59:24). According to a traditional, commonly held view there are 99 such names. There is no official list of these names, but in common lists one of the names is *AlMuntaqim* which means "the avenger," one who punishes his enemies for their sins, after having gained victory over them.

Usage of such attributes and titles depicts God as a person who is a warrior. Facing such a depiction within the framework of a theistic view, it would be pointless to ask "what exactly might this mean," but it would not be pointless to ask for some clarification of the meaning of such attributions. One interesting clarification is provided by a single letter of a biblical verse, one word in the English translation: "The Lord shall go forth as a mighty man, he shall stir up jealousy like a man of war; he shall cry, yea, roar; he shall prevail against his enemies" (Isaiah 42:13). The title of being a warrior is a simile, a comparative figure of speech. Thus, what is meant by attributing to God being "like a man of war" and "stirring up jealousy" in enemies is, first, that on a par with what happens in a human engagement with enemies, the latter are rendered jealous, and second, whereas in human warfare the causal agent of the jealousy is "a man of war," in divine warfare the causal agent of such jealousy is God.

Some titles are metaphorical in nature. In a variety of biblical verses, God is described, for example, as taking "hold of shield and buckler" (Psalms 35:2), and "drawing out also the spear" (Psalms 35:3), or using "arrows" and a "spear" (Habakkuk 3:11). Such attributions of aspects of being a warrior should be understood as metaphors. Attribution by metaphors is more direct than attribution by simile, but both induce understanding in terms of an appropriate mapping of similarities and dissimilarities between human and divine involvement in warfare. The major conceptual element of similarity is that of causal agency.

Other views of the nature of God do not involve an explicit attribution of being a war hero but leave room for such attributions. Consider, for example, St Anselm's conception of God as "that than which nothing greater can be conceived," used in his

Proslogion (chapter II) for what eventually has become known as the first “ontological argument” for the existence of God (Anselm 2001). If one shares with St Anselm that conception of God, whether as a definition of the notion of *God* or for some other reason, then one is led to share with him a variety of attributes, for each of which an argument similar to the ontological argument can be made. For example, one of God’s attributes is omnipotence. If God was not omnipotent, then something greater than God could have been conceived, namely something that has every positive property of God but is also omnipotent. Since God is that than which nothing greater can be thought, God is omnipotent. Similar arguments lead to attributions of omniscience and perfect benevolence, but also to an attribution of being the supreme warrior. If God was not a warrior at all or was a warrior but not the supreme one, then again we could have thought about something greater than God, which is impossible. The meaning of the title of being a supreme warrior has to be clarified, but so does the meaning of many other attributes and titles, such as omnipotence and perfect benevolence, both of which have given rise to intriguing paradoxes.

Views of the nature of God that are utterly different are those according to which it is essentially impossible for God to be a warrior. The first Encyclical Letter of Pope Benedict XVI was entitled “*Deus Caritas Est*,” God is love. In its introduction, the Pope wrote that “in a world where the name of God is sometimes associated with vengeance or even a duty of hatred and violence” it is “both timely and significant” to speak of “the love which God lavishes upon us and which we in turn must share with others.” The message that “God is love” has been often taken to convey the idea that God is never violent. A common Christian view is that understanding the nature of Jesus Christ is the right step in an attempt to gain some understanding of the nature of God. Since Jesus Christ manifested love and non-violence, God is not a warrior, not even a just warrior, but the supreme reality of love, care, and non-violence. Any depiction of God as involved in warfare should not be literally understood and care ought to be taken not to be perniciously misled by it to any of the vices of violence.

This caveat helps us in understanding how the same list of God’s attributes and titles includes both ones that are essentially related to peace and non-violence and ones essentially related to war and calamity. None of the terms used in reference to these attributes and titles should be understood literally. Figurative pictures of a person who is an excellent warrior or a person who manifests absolute love, care, and compassion do not depict the meaning of God’s attributes and titles. They are at most an apt starting point for a project of drawing elaborate analogies and intricate similarities.

A simple example would be the first step in an attempt to understand being courageous as a title of God. Assume that the virtue of courage is analyzed as in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, namely the medium course between cowardice and recklessness. Facing a danger or a difficulty, for example, a courageous person does not recklessly ignore it, nor does he cowardly escape it. A person of courage does the right thing, at the right time, at the right place and in the right manner. On the one hand, the idea that some state or action can pose a danger or presents difficulty to God does not make sense in theism of familiar types. On the other hand, it makes perfect sense in theism of this type to deny the possibility that being a coward or being reckless could be titles of God. Most importantly, the idea of doing the right thing, at the right time and place and in the right manner, is an ingredient of the notion of God, in the common theistic conceptions of God as a person and an agent of supreme and perfect attributes.

War and Worship

Worship, within religious contexts, is a practice in which people participate in order to express a devotion to a deity, which often reflects a firm intention to honor or glorify it. Worship can take different forms. Consequently, there is a variety of ways of manifesting the nature of warfare elements as forms of worship.

Different forms of worship vary with the extent to which they are formal in nature. The most formal form of worship is the ritual. Consider, for example, the case of a daily service. First of all, it is a rule-governed activity. Rules specify all the major ingredients of the service, such as the time during which it has to take place, the place where it has to be performed, the participants and the different roles they have to play during the service, the texts that ought to be read and their distribution among the participants and the stages of the service, and so on. The system of rules that govern the service is constitutive: it defines the ritual and governs it. The meaning ascribed to the ritual, and to a person's regularly or occasionally participating in it, is not defined by the rules. The meaning is the role played by the ritual as a practice within the framework of a certain denomination, its life and traditions. Usually, rituals are taken to be forms of expressing devotion to a deity, which reflects a firm intention to honor or glorify it. Naturally, then, proper participation in a ritual is taken to be an expression of such a devotion to the deity, particularly when it is done regularly.

Some have thought that, like worship, war is a ritual activity. However, in a classical war, which is a clash between large military forces in a broad manner that involves ample violence and vast calamities, war is not confined to the practice of a single, all encompassing ritual. Classical wars involve goals that are served by a variety of means and are not regulated by rules in the way a service is regulated by its constitutive rules. The goal of a state military force in a classical just war is to defend a regime or its citizens by means of suppressing the forces of the enemy that jeopardizes them. Attempts to suppress a military force can be constrained by some rules, but such rules use given notions of suppression and victory and do not define them, unlike the rules that govern a ritual which define their major notions, such as victory within the framework of some game.

A classical war cannot take place within the framework of a single ritual, nevertheless it can involve rituals that render it meaningful within the framework of certain theistic conceptions and practices. A biblical example is that of the role played by the priests in a waged war: "When thou goest out to battle against thine enemies . . . be not afraid of them; for the Lord thy God is with thee" (Deuteronomy 20:1). The manifestation of conviction that God is present with you when you go to war is a ritual, mentioned in the next verses:

The priest shall approach and speak unto the people; And shall say unto them, Hear, O Israel, ye approach this day unto battle against your enemies; let not your hearts faint, fear not, and do not tremble, neither be ye terrified because of them; For the Lord your God is he that goeth with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you.

(Deuteronomy 20: 2–4)

The ritual casts theistic meaning on the fighting activities.

In a struggle of a more personal nature, rather than a fully fledged war, a proper performance of a certain ritual can count as a genuine struggle. There are rituals that

forbid eating any food during a certain period of time or forbid eating some types of food during certain periods of times or regularly. The meaning of such rituals can be captured in terms of a person's struggle against temptations of a certain kind or temptation in general. Practicing a struggle against temptation is expressing devotion to God, when the practice is Jewish, Christian or Muslim, for example. Following the rules that govern such a practice counts as carrying out a struggle against temptation, which, in turn, counts as expressing devotion to God, which, in turn, counts as worshiping God.

Another form of expressing devotion to a theistic deity is that of monastic life. Unlike a ritual such as a service, which is confined to certain times and places, persons, and texts, life within the confines of a monastery might well include a rich variety of activities, even if all are manifestations of prayer, study, and work. While prayers within a monastery are rituals, study can be personal in nature, though strictly theistic or even denominational, and work is always constituted by many actions of different natures. The meaning of a person's life within a monastery is determined by a commonly held conception of monastic life as a form of devotion to God. Rituals of prayer are naturally regarded as devotional, but study and work can take place anywhere. It is the commonly held conception of monastic life that renders study and work of the monastic kinds of devotional significance.

The way of life within an ordinary monastery is a form of theistic devotion. The way of life of combatants in a military force can be portrayed as on a par with that of the monks in a monastery, with one significant distinction. Life in such a monastery is presumably devotional, because it is commonly held to be devotional. If there is no reason to assume that a monk or a nun, or a community of monks or of nuns study or work in a way that is incompatible with their presumed theistic devotion, then they are held to maintain a devotional form of life. The way of life of combatants in a military force is usually not presumed to be devotional. However, if the military force is devoted to the pursuit of theistically significant goals that involve combat or the threat thereof, then life in such a military force is presumably devotional.

On the background of this analogy, we can understand how the activities of a certain military force in a fully fledged war can constitute a genuine case of worship. Consider two military forces facing each other. The first one is devoted to a military attempt to destroy every type of worship of the other. The second one is devoted to an attempted military defense of its types of worship. Since both an attack on forms of worship and a defense of forms of worship are usually of denominational significance, we see in this example how the way of life of combatants in a military force can be naturally depicted as devotional and their warfare as worship. Thus, a war on idolatry, in some sense, and iconoclasm can be understood as cases of theistic worship, if they are performed by a theistically devotional community of combatants of the appropriate types.

The activities of a military force under circumstances of the above-mentioned structure can be considered to be a case of theistic worship under circumstances of two different types, which have now to be discussed.

The first type is of *directly divine* wars. Wars of this type are waged in obedience to an explicit divine command, as described in the related scriptures. Here is a biblical major example:

And the Lord spake unto Moses . . . saying; Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, When ye are passed over Jordan into the land of Canaan; Then ye shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you, and

destroy all their pictures, and destroy all their molten images, and quite pluck down all their high places; And ye shall dispossess [the inhabitants] of the land, and dwell therein; for I have given you the land to possess it.

(Numbers 33:50–53)

When the Jordan is passed over and a war takes place, it is a war that expressed the devotion of the Children of Israel to God, by obeying His command, as directly given to Moses and eventually to them. Obeying such directly given divine commands is a form of worship. In the present example, the religious nature of the war is related to two elements of the command: First, and obviously, the source of the command is the Lord, and therefore obedience is of high religious significance. Second, and not less interestingly, the specified nature of the war, which has to include activities of destroying idols and the sites of their idolatrous worship, is of deep religious significance, because it marks the ideal relationships between worshiping God and worshiping idols: the latter should be totally abolished, leaving room for the former solely. A struggle against idolatry is a constitutive element of the common cases of practiced theism.

Directly divine wars have causes. We have just seen an example. An important relationship between theism and war is manifest in the delineation of these causes. To extend the discussion of that example, the Jewish post-biblical tradition defined a distinction between “obligatory war” and an “optional war.” (Discussions of both types of war resulted in many amplifications as well as in an understanding of what counts as a “prohibited war,” to which we will return.) Maimonides’ exhaustive enumeration of “obligatory wars” includes three: the biblical war against the Canaanites, which we saw in the previous paragraph, the biblical war against the Amalekites (Exodus 17:8–16), which is usually taken to be of no practical significance beyond remembrance, and also any war that is meant “to deliver Israel from an enemy that attacks them” (*Mishne Torah, Hilchoth Melachim* 5:1; it is in the codex compiled and written by Maimonides, the part devoted to Laws of Kings). Among these three cases of obligatory war, the first one is a case of a directly divine war, whereas the second and the third are cases of naturally justified defensive wars that are not directly divine ones. The former one counts as a case of worship. Should the two other cases also count as such?

If the notion of “worship” is understood to involve more than service and other rituals and to include actions, activities, and practices that are performed as expressions of devotion to a deity, then defensive wars can be regarded as cases of worship, if certain conditions obtain. An *indirectly divine* war is one that (a) is waged and (b) carried out as an expression of devotion, as well as (c) explained and (d) justified in terms of commonly held conviction of the relationships between the related deity, the combatants and their communities. A defensive war can be naturally portrayed and even justified as an attempt of a community to defend its members whose life, well-being, property or independence are under jeopardy as a result of hostile actions or activities on the part of another community. As such, a defensive war, even when it is absolutely morally justified, does not have any feature that gives rise to the idea that the war is a case of worshiping a certain deity. However, if a defensive war is an indirectly divine one, then there are several features that enable one to portray the war as a case of a devotional activity, characteristic of worship. The features are actually the above-mentioned (a)–(d). Assume a community shares the conviction that God, their deity, is interested in their existence on earth, which means that their very existence is of divine significance. Hence, their defensive war serves not only the natural personal interest of

human survival and cultural interest of community survival, but also a religious interest of devotional survival. Assume, furthermore, that the same community imposes restrictions on its practices of warfare that rest on grounds, say, of precepts specified in the related scriptures. For example, they do not kill or rape women they capture and are fond of, but rather set them free or marry them if they and the women so desire, because this is what their scriptures tell them about the religious traditions of their ancestors. Assume also that the same community regards itself as established by God, in some ancient time, for some divine purposes, such as maintaining a form of life that is a deep and broad embodiment of the idea of devoting human life to practical expressions of human relationships with God. When such a community has to explain a defensive war it carries out, the explanation will be given in terms of a defense of a form of life that is of a certain religious significance. Finally, such a community will have to justify its involvement in a war, beyond the arguments of individual and collective self-defense, on grounds of a religious argument that would show that the commonly held religious convictions of the community have as their consequences the preference of a defensive war and its calamities over destruction or surrender and their disastrous results. Thus, features (a)–(d) of an indirectly divine war can serve as handles for portraying a defensive war as a case of worship.

In some theistic religions, a conception of the Messiah plays a significant role. This is the case, for example, in Judaism, in Christianity and, in a sense, in Shiite Islam too. The conceptions are different in major elements, but they all share the idea of a person who is absolutely devoted to the related deity. In Judaism, the Messiah is to arrive but so far whoever has claimed to be the Messiah has not been a true one. Accordingly, there are criteria for the true Messiah. Maimonides drew a distinction between the criteria of a presumed Messiah and those of a certain one. One of the former necessary conditions for a king arising from the House of David to be a presumed Messiah is that he “fights the wars of God” (Maimonides, *Mishne Torah*, *Hilchoth Melachim* 11:4). To the extent that the attributes and titles of the Messiah have to do with attributes and titles of God and with worship, such a conception of the Messiah is a special example of the role played by war in attributes and titles of God and his worship.

Just War Doctrine

Conceptual relationships abound between the general sphere of theism and the general realm of warfare. Usually, recognition and discussion of any such relationships are confined within certain denominations or religions. Occasionally, cultural interface can result in certain conceptual relationships coming to play a role across the boundaries of a single religion. An exceptional case would be one that started within the framework of a certain denomination and eventually became presented, discussed, developed, and applied under numerous circumstances, way beyond the original confines. Such is the Just War Tradition, to which we now turn.

Let us very briefly mention some of the major figures in the history of the Just War Tradition, whose works on theism in general have been of much influence. First is St Augustine (354–430) who, in *The City of God*, denied resort to violence for individual self-defense, but allowed “just wars” to be waged by “the wise man,” because of the “wrongdoing of the opposing party.” Most important is St Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), who systematically presented and defended, in his *Summa Theologicae*, principles of Just War, namely Good Cause, Proper Authority, and Pursuit of Peace (Aquinas 1911).

Additional contributions were made by Francisco de Vitoria (1486–1546), in his posthumously published lectures on *The Laws of War*, and Francisco Suarez (1548–1617), in his *On the Laws*, in which a natural law conception is developed (see Barbier 1966; Hamilton 1963; and Doyle 2010). Finally, the Dutch Calvinist Hugo Grotius (1583–1645) should be mentioned, whose *On the Law of War and Peace* is taken to be a most significant early stage in the history of international law (Grotius 2005).

Under titles such as “Just War Tradition,” “Just War Doctrine,” or “Just War Theory” one finds a family of concepts, distinctions, views, arguments, and implementations. It is impossible to delineate a single conceptual framework that has prevailed during the almost two millennia that have elapsed since the first features of the tradition started emerging, but it is possible to present the most conspicuous features of the vast family of conceptual frameworks that have appeared under these titles. The following simple presentation of these features covers three major elements. This brief presentation will be followed by a discussion of some of the major principles underlying Just War theories, with particular attention to their relationships with theism.

First, any Just War Theory is a set of principles that are intended as general guidelines for everyone practically involved in warfare. A party to a war that follows these guidelines in carrying out its warfare activities is entitled to describe its part in the war as “just.” From this point of view it carries out a “just war.”

It is natural for a religious tradition that is theistic in nature to include elements of a Just War Theory. Within each tradition, people ought to show their respectful attitude towards the related deity in their form of life. Such an attitude induces a distinction between the Good and the Evil that is applicable to major aspects of ordinary human life or even all of them. Possible effects of war are so deep and broad that it would be implausible to exempt warfare from what is being guided by the distinction between the Good and the Evil. The biblical verse “Depart from Evil, and do Good; seek peace, and pursue it” (Psalms 34:14) can be used in every theistic religious tradition for imposing practical guidelines on warfare.

Second, a Just War Theory includes three levels of principles. The difference between the levels is a difference between warfare-related considerations that have to be made with respect to a war that ought to be just. The first level consists of principles related to decisions of waging a war that ought to be just (*jus ad bellum*). The second level consists of principles related to decisions made during war, mainly with respect to combat (*jus in bello*). The third consists of principles related to the circumstances that are experienced after the end of hostilities (*jus post bellum*). This division into three stages is a logical one and it would be unreasonable not to resort to it in any systematic approach to warfare.

This logical division into stages has been used for drawing normative distinctions related to responsibility and culpability. For example, combatants who are active during the second stage only, are not to be blamed for a decision made by the king or the government to wage an unjustified, aggressive war which they are going to carry out. The moral significance of the distinction between the stages is a subject of a deep debate. To the extent a theistic conception of morality delineates moral responsibility in a broad way, its adherents would be reluctant to accept a stage distinction that exempts combatants from being blameworthy of actively and even forcefully participating in an unjust war.

Third, a Just War Theory includes variants of certain principles and arguments that are meant to show why these principles ought to serve as guidelines for the war to be just. We now turn to a brief review of the major principles, some of which are accompanied by short explanations of their particular significance from theistic points of view.

Proper Authority

A war may be waged only by a proper authority, such as a government of a democratic state, and only if the decision has been made in a constitutionally proper way. It would be plausible to assume that a proper procedure is one in which strict attention is paid to the other principles as well.

An ancient Catholic theistic doctrine views kings who reign in its realm as having been bestowed by God with absolute power to make binding earthly decisions. Hence, a decision to wage a war, if properly made, is a decision of divine significance and indirectly reflects God's will or conception of the Good that ought to oppose the Evil. Modern theistic views shoulder the authority on whoever "have responsibility for the common good" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2309). It is assumed that a proper understanding of the notion of "the common good" manifests major parts of a theistic conception of common good in the human sphere. In Islam, it used to be commonly held that only the Muslim nation has proper authority with respect to holy wars, but in recent times there has been a trend of relegating authority to every devout Muslim. This view has been part of an ideology that has led to terrorism of certain types.

Just Cause

This principle is of prime importance, because it delineates the reasons that might justify waging a war. The reason of self-defense is on the top of the list, where "self-defense" applies, first, to the duty of a state to defend its own citizens when they are under some hostile jeopardy, and second, to the right of a state to defend its political sovereignty and territorial integrity. Both parts of this reason apply only when the opponents are aggressors, those who resort to violence for no just reason. "Aggression" has been applied beyond strictly understood self-defense, for example, when a case of attempted genocide justifies intervention.

Good Intention

Since a war can be of a very broad nature, it is not implausible to expect that the war itself, or at least parts thereof, are not carried out for the pure sake of the just cause that justifies it in general. The war can be used for ulterior reasons, such as paying revenge or expressing hatred. The good intention that should govern a just war is to serve the just cause by just means, as prescribed by the principles and other moral considerations. Naturally, the requirement of good intention is related to every theistic view that emphasized "purity of heart" considerations.

Last Resort

Wars bring with them horrible results, even if the causes are just and the intentions good. If the problem that the war is an attempt to solve can be practically and effectively solved without resort to broad violent hostilities, which are bound to result in calamities, war ought to be avoided and the problem peacefully solved by negotiation or activities that are peaceful or at least short of war. The moral significance of this principle is self-evident.

Chance of Success

An attempt to carry out a war that is assumed in advance to be futile excludes the possibility of its being a just war. The effects of war are too important for war to be waged when it is improbable to assume victory can be gained.

The requirement of “serious prospects of success” (Catechism of the Catholic Church) excludes from the realm of just wars ones that have a symbolic value solely. There is a tension between such an exclusion and some religious traditions of a clear theistic nature. Martyrdom is familiar from all major traditions, manifesting an extreme form of devotion, showing that human life is precious but not sacred to an extent that justifies every course of survival. Such a tension can be relieved by drawing a distinction between individual considerations, where martyrdom and similar symbolic gestures are sometimes legitimate, and collective considerations, where futility is a compelling exclusionary condition of just war.

Proportionality

This principle ought to be followed both when the possibility of waging a war is pondered, on the level of governments and similar decision makers (*jus ad bellum*), and when the possibility of a certain combat action is under consideration by commanders and their troops (*jus in bello*). During both of these stages, it is required to ask whether what can be reasonably expected to be gained by the war as a whole, or by a certain action or operation during a war, justifies the undesirable results of the war or the combat action or operation, respectively. The perspectives for evaluating what is gained and what is undesirable are different. A state or a military commander who are required to make proportionality considerations are expected to evaluate the value of war or mission from their own point of view solely. However, when undesirable effects are considered, they are not just those that are going to appear on one’s side of the battle front, but rather such effects on both sides of it. Thus, for example, collateral damage among enemy non-combatants who take no part in hostilities ought to be considered absolutely undesirable and be taken into account during proportionality considerations.

Proportionality is often presented in terms of “weighting” good and bad effects. Although such a presentation can mislead people into a simple and morally wrong counting of casualties on both sides of the war, it serves to show an underlying theistic conception: The good should be supported, defended and extended, while the evil should be reduced, minimized if not eliminated.

Distinction

This principle requires that a distinction be respected during war between combatants and non-combatants. The latter should never be intentionally attacked, while the former are legitimate targets, unless they are seriously wounded, have surrendered or enjoy some particular privilege, such as being chaplains or physicians.

The underlying idea seems commendable: The immunity of non-combatants is an excellent manner of alleviating the calamities of war. In the context of classical warfare it rested on two important assumptions, namely reciprocity and practicality. It constitutes a fair arrangement when respected by all warring parties and it is easily implementable by combatants wearing uniforms and openly bearing their arms. Since these

assumptions do not obtain under present conditions of terrorism, other ways of alleviating the calamities of war by minimizing collateral damages are sought.

Whereas the induced protection of non-combatants is commonly held to be of prime importance and is even extended by different means, the attitude towards combatants has remained morally problematic. The human dignity of combatants can hardly be claimed to be protected, when they are explicitly described or implicitly treated as instruments. During the early Just War Tradition, the model of distinction was that between sinners and non-sinners. Later it was replaced by a distinction according a key role to the dangerousness of the persons involved. A morally proper distinction, which would also better fit theistic conceptions of inalienable human dignity, would rest on the roles played by different human beings under a variety of circumstances of conflict and hostility.

Conclusion

The list of principles briefly reviewed above does not include special *jus post bellum* ones. The third part of most Just War theories is usually not sufficiently developed and endorsed, though principles of compensation and punishment have been used in several cases.

Principles of *jus post bellum* are not well-developed but the priority and pursuit of peace seem to prevail in both theistic and secular attitudes towards warfare. The first section in the entry on War in Hitchcock's analysis of the Bible is entitled "War offensive to God." Although we have seen how titles of warriors have been ascribed to God within theistic conceptions, they do not reflect a general attitude towards war and peace. Such a conception is better expressed in the verse of Psalms: "I [am for] peace, but when I speak, they [are] for war" (120:7).

Related Topics

Chapter 31: Civil Society; Chapter 32: Human Rights; Chapter 34: Law; Chapter 37: Globalization

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34

LAW

Daniel N. Robinson

Historically and until relatively recent times the rules of law found in various cultures and ages have been based on or justified in terms of foundational beliefs of a religious nature. Even in the world of classical Greece, though the city-states never hosted an official and doctrinally orthodox religion, neither was any city-state entirely secular. Theism in the broadest sense has been integral to the civic dimensions of life in all cultures and civilizations that have left a clear record of the sources and binding authority of their laws. From the earliest law codes to the expressly secular statutes of the modern nation-states, legal and theistic elements have been interwoven. Thus, in the *Prologue* to his Code (c.1790 BCE) Hammurabi declares that he was sent by Marduk, patron god of Babylon, to rule the people and protect their right of property. Mosaic law (twelfth century BCE) claims similar divine origins. Although China followed a somewhat different course after the widespread adoption of Confucianism, the earlier dynastic periods recognized the emperor as “Sun King,” the ultimate mediator between heaven and earth, and the judge of all things lawful and unlawful.

This perspective is evident in both ancient Greek and Roman law. Aristotle, whose terse definition of law was “reason without passion,” nonetheless embellishes this with the claim that the ideal rule of law would feature “God and Reason alone,” though the introduction of human imperfections adds “an element of the beast” (*Politics*, 1287a 30). Ancient Roman law, seemingly so secular, was nonetheless subject to direct influence by the priestly College of Pontiffs such that, even after the expulsion of the last of the Roman kings in 510 BCE, the *Collegium Pontificum* remained the Senate’s chief advisory body on all legal matters.

The fall of the Roman Empire and the emergence of Christianity as the dominant institution of the West fully incorporated the principles of Roman law. The long and systematic process of absorption resulted in a body of law, both ecclesiastical and civil, in which the doctrinal teachings of the Roman Catholic Church were structured according to philosophical, procedural and formal modes already well developed in classical versions of Natural Law. The foundational assumptions of Roman law were expressed most clearly by Cicero, who declared justice to be a natural possession and not a matter of opinion (*Nos ad justitiam esse natos, neque opinione sed natura constitutum esse jus*; *De Legibus*, I, v). In the patrimony of Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas defines law as “an ordinance of reason” intended to promote the general good. Through the light of *natural reason*, one discerns and distinguishes the good and the bad. Natural reason, without benefit of revelation, is able to judge of right and wrong and to recognize the connection between these and the general welfare of the person and of the community. As the

universe itself is governed by divine reason, it is by way of reason that human beings become active participants in the divine plan. Aquinas concludes: "Thus it is clear that natural law is nothing other than the rational creature's participation in the eternal law" (S.T., I, II, Q 94).

To a greater or (slightly) lesser degree, the place of natural reason in human affairs would be acknowledged in the centuries after Aquinas and found in the major works of Hugo Grotius, Samuel Puffendorf, Richard Hooker and John Locke. The precepts are the foundation for Natural Law Theory, the dominant jurisprudence of the West until the first half of the nineteenth century.

Islamic law has several sources, the primary one being the *Qur'an*, alleged to have reached the Prophet directly from Allah through the angel Gabriel. Where the book itself is silent, legal authority then is found in the *Sunnah*, the known practices of the Prophet during his lifetime. The many volumes of *Hadith* record and interpret these chronicles. Where there is still no scriptural or exegetical body of settled opinion, the Muslim community itself seeks consensus (*Ijma*) though, in practice, the consensus is reached not by the community at large but by an assembly of Imams. These different sources of Islamic law must finally be reconciled to the *Qur'an*. Accordingly, Islamic law is properly classified as "revealed" and is not to be compromised by any human institution or power, including that of *natural reason*. The conclusions of the latter either comport with the *Qur'an* or have no binding force.

Western jurisprudence took a new but not sudden turn late in the seventeenth century and in response to the religious factionalism in the wake of the Reformation. Both Reformation and Counter-Reformation hardened versions of orthodoxy in the Christian world, resulting in strong legal sanctions designed to establish conformity. All of the colonial charters and constitutions in the New World acknowledged faithfulness to Christian teaching, even as different denominations of Christianity were more or less official in the different colonies.

Movement toward an ever more fully secular conception of law developed hesitantly during the Enlightenment, impelled by the macabre consequences of religious factionalism and supported by philosophical works clarifying the distinctions between and among religious belief, moral conviction and the nature and authority of legislative acts. As the letter of the law was drawn from a secular perspective, its spirit still drew inspiration from theistic sources. Note that the United States' *Declaration of Independence* identifies the Creator as the source of inalienable human rights. Thirteen years later, the French National Assembly in August of 1789 would proclaim its *Declaration of the Rights of Man* "in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being."

This much granted, legislative assemblies in the West entered the nineteenth century with painful and recent memories of the fate of the rule of law when seeking to favor one set of religious beliefs over others. Among the more economical and systematic of early philosophical attempts to lay new foundations for the law were the lectures given by John Austin at University College, London, and published in 1832 as *The Province of Jurisprudence Determined*. It represented and fortified the growing influence of what came to be known as *Legal Positivism* and the waning influence of Natural Law Theory.

Law, on this understanding, is an enactment; a command, issued by a superior person or body and, when necessary, implemented through the application of force. The question of whether such enactments conform to the dictates of natural reason or are consistent with one's religious beliefs or honor one's most firmly held moral convictions is utterly distinct from the question of whether the enactments are valid as *laws*. That

question is answered by examining the conventional means by which a given people or community has made laws, laws now understood as something of a cultural artifact created for a purpose and bearing the marks of a time and place in which such an artifact was found to be useful. The German *Gesetz ist Gesetz* expresses the thesis: Law is law. Moral sentiments, divine inspiration, the very voice of the gods must be understood as different from positive law; perhaps more compelling, but different.

On this conception of law, varieties of theism are not ruled out, for a given community might well pass laws and adjudicate cases on the basis of divine revelation or some sacred text or under the authority of one regarded as holy. However, under these conditions, it is not the truth of the religious content or the holiness of the accepted authority that establishes the commands as law. Rather, it is the social fact that, in this place these persons have traditionally been ruled by just these beliefs and practices.

The bracketing or abandonment of Natural Law would result in a variety of theories of law beyond the Positivist conception. In America and Scandinavia, a school of *Legal Realism* emerged in the twentieth century, led by such figures as Oliver Wendell Holmes, Carl Llewellyn and Jerome Frank. Holmes famously defined law as that which permitted him to predict what a judge and jury would decide in a given case, and Jerome Frank was unsurprised to discover that an adjudicative outcome was strongly influenced by what the judge had for breakfast. So construed, legal decisions are not reliably explained or predicted by taking counsel with “natural reason” which, in a given case, might not even be relevant. Rather, laws are instruments with which to achieve desired results, these being political, social, or personal.

That such a perspective establishes a collision course is clear: A theistic perspective, when sincerely held and understood to be the authoritative guide to action, is not likely to yield to a rule of law sensitive to the judge’s cuisine or, for that matter, to the preferred and shifting social aspirations of a majority. Indeed, the consistent “realist” must recognize the power of religious conviction in directing the aims and lives of many millions of citizens. But so, too, must the advocate of Natural Law, for there will be occasions when the summons of religious orthodoxy calls for actions not plausibly justified in purely rational terms.

Conflicts are inevitable and fall under distinct but overlapping categories that can be expressed as questions: Even granting the divine origin of a given command, on what basis is one obliged to obey it? On what basis does God establish binding laws? Should religious conviction constitute a valid basis on which to refuse to comply with the requirements of civil law? On what basis is the state obliged to consider religious doctrines and practices in the prosecution of its laws? To what extent, if any, should there be some “wall of separation” between civil and religious life? What legal impediments and impositions are permissible as the state attempts to respect the religious convictions of members of various sects and confessions?

Sixty-three of the current member nations of the United Nations have official state religions. Of these fourteen are Roman Catholic, fifteen are Eastern Orthodox, five are Lutheran and twenty-three are Islamic. The extent to which the doctrinal teachings of the religions inform and regulate the political and social life of citizens varies considerably. The Church of England is the official religion of England but, as a result of the Reform Acts of the 1830s and thereafter, non-members suffer no significant civil disadvantage. Nothing in British law limits the range or nature of religious practices. At the other extreme, in Saudi Arabia, a non-Muslim may not enter the city of Mecca and non-Islamic religious practices are unlawful. So, too, is any attempt to proselytize.

Moreover, conversion from Islam to another religion carries the death penalty. Thus, the fact of an official state religion does not in and of itself reveal the extent to which one's religious beliefs and practices constitute a benefit or vulnerability or the extent to which religious doctrine influences the administration of justice.

A major source of conflict between religion and the secular state begins with the recognition that there is a distinction between divine law and positive law and that the civic dimensions of life should be bounded and protected by the latter. Against this is the counter claim that, for the believer, the will of God is dispositive and cannot be set aside by the legislative initiatives of mere mortals. The problem, of course, is that even believers are not of one mind as to what God actually requires in all cases and that, for the non-believer, the notion itself does not rise higher than the level of superstition. Even those tolerantly inclined to honor religious convictions that they do not share cannot ignore the diversity and even incompatibilities found between and among various religions.

A cogent philosophical statement of one of the core dilemmas is passed down from antiquity in the form of the "Euthyphro question," named after Plato's dialogue, *Euthyphro*. In his discussion with Socrates, Euthyphro first argues that what is pious is that which is loved by the gods. But Socrates counters with the observation that the gods might not agree and this leads Euthyphro to declare that the pious is that which all the gods agree to love. This, too, proves to be unhelpful for what makes anything beloved by the gods is simply that it is beloved by the gods, but what makes something pious (or right, just, morally good, etc.) must be something intrinsic which presumably would obtain even if the gods did not love it. One might conclude, then, that it is not the love of the gods that makes something right or good or pious, but that it is in the nature of the gods to love such properties.

The Euthyphro problem continues to inform issues in morality and law. According to *Divine Command Theory*, what is right or obligatory gains that status by expressing the will of the gods. Morality itself is thus judged to be meaningless once such divine grounds are denied. The will of God is the ground of everything and is itself not grounded in anything more basic. As Luther said of God's will, "there is no cause or reason that can be laid down as a rule or measure for it" (Luther 1969 [1524]: 236). Of course, an omnipotent God is unconstrained by definition. Included among the divine powers surely is the power to withdraw love from one object and bestow it on another. If what makes a course of action or property or event good or just or pious is no more than the gods loving it, there is no guarantee of stability in the domains of the worthy and the worthless, the sublime and the profane.

A way out of the bind is the presumption that what makes a divine command binding is the perfected goodness of the source. C. S. Lewis drew attention to the problem with this line of argument when he observed that "if good is to be *defined* as what God commands, then the goodness of God Himself is emptied of meaning and the commands of an omnipotent fiend would have the same claim on us as those of the 'righteous Lord'" (Lewis 1994 [1967]: 79).

Tied to, but distinct from, these considerations, it is clear beyond dispute that the world's major religions do not reach the same conclusions on matters of central importance either to morality or to the rule of law. For those who accept the authority of the New Testament, the Christian is to forgive sinners. Only one without sin may cast the first stone, etc. However, the adulterous act that is forgiven directly by Jesus Christ is one warranting death by stoning under the law of *Sharia*. It cannot be by way of theism

itself that the conflicting consequences of this are reconciled. Theism both broadly conceived and at the level of sectarian orthodoxy provides no means external to itself with which to establish or demonstrate its adequacy or binding authority. If circularity is to be avoided, the answer to the question of whether a divine command must be followed calls for more than a repetition of the putative fact that it is a divine command. As for allegedly authoritative texts, these are so transparently subject to multiple and conflicting interpretations as to have required throughout history the use of actual or implied force to establish and maintain orthodoxy.

The Divine Command thesis has been subjected to philosophical analysis and criticism chiefly on the further grounds that it leads to arbitrary and capricious judgments even regarding fundamental moral precepts. Unless the divine will makes rational contact with the developed moral understanding of rational beings, there is actually no basis on which to impute rationality to God! Presumably, a rational creature seeks and finds a reason for action and is able, both before and after the fact, to account for the action in rational terms. It would not be sufficient to offer an account that includes no more than “the will of God,” for there would then be the added requirement to establish why that will was dispositive in the given circumstance. This is clear from the fact that a religion that imputes to God unlimited power thereby grants that the resources of the divine *could* bring about whatever is divinely willed. Thus, from the fact that what is commanded may nonetheless be ignored or violated, some sort of explanation is needed as to the source of the freedom or dispensation and the circumstances under which it is exercised. Moreover, to the extent that there is such freedom, there is as much room for civil as for religious assessments of guilt and punishment.

Such tensions and conflicts between law and theism are instances of the wider class of tensions and conflicts that arise when the claims of conscience or the commands of religion cannot be reconciled to the requirements of law. Recognition of the conflicts and attempts to resolve them have a long history. Between 1140 and 1150 CE the jurist Gratian composed his *Decretum Gratiani*, which analyzed the points of agreement and disagreement between Roman Law and Canon Law (Winroth 2000). His research and writing produced six treatises over a course of years, these standing as the *Code of Canon Law* of the Roman Catholic Church until 1918 (Boudinhon 1910). In 1765, consistent with the widespread hostility toward the Roman Catholic Church, John Adams published his *Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law*, declaring the former to be, “the most refined, sublime, extensive, and astonishing constitution of policy that ever was conceived by the mind of man . . . framed by the Romish clergy for the aggrandizement of their own order” (Adams 1765).

Adams surely could find in Canon Law any number of needlessly oppressive and blatantly superstitious elements. Canon Law as developed in the Middle Ages tended (as did the Roman Stoics) to merge mathematics, cosmology and anthropology in one unified and general system, the result being the application of one set of principles to domains in which they would seem to have no real connection. One example of this pertains to the Canon Law setting down rules for liturgical music. On a theory crafted from Pythagorean and Platonic traditions, a distinction was made between “perfect” and “imperfect” music, the latter featuring musical intervals judged to be so defective as to corrupt the character of the audience and the performers. The infamous “tritone”—the *Diabolus in Musica*—that divides the octave was the greatest offender and its use was punishable.

Adams’ stern rebuke duly noted and generously understood, it is also the case that core precepts of Canon Law provided a rational scheme of law for the Anglo-European

world of Christianity for centuries. It provided the theological and jural foundations for a range of significant secular concepts including the principles of just war, the dignity of the individual person, conscientious objection and the requirement of charity and the disposition of forgiveness. Canon Law is usefully compared with Rabbinic Judaic law and Islamic law in relation to a variety of offenses. Adultery is illustrative. In Rabbinic Judaism, the husband of an adulterous wife is forbidden from living with her and must take steps to dissolve the marriage. In *Sharia* law, adultery may result in death by stoning or, more leniently, subjection to 100 lashes. Under Canon Law the following obtains:

Can. 1151 Spouses have the duty and right to preserve conjugal living unless a legitimate cause excuses them.

Can. 1152 §1. Although it is earnestly recommended that a spouse, moved by Christian charity and concerned for the good of the family, not refuse forgiveness to an adulterous partner and not disrupt conjugal life, nevertheless, if the spouse did not condone the fault of the other expressly or tacitly, the spouse has the right to sever conjugal living unless the spouse consented to the adultery, gave cause for it, or also committed adultery.

Conscientious objection offers another instance of conflicts between civil law and the theistic. Canon Law forbids the clergy from direct military participation in armed conflicts. The rationale is expressed this way by Aquinas:

Now warlike pursuits are altogether incompatible with the duties of a bishop and a cleric . . . it is unbecoming for them to slay or shed blood, and it is more fitting that they should be ready to shed their own blood for Christ, so as to imitate in deed what they portray in their ministry . . . Wherefore it is altogether unlawful for clerics to fight, because war is directed to the shedding of blood.

(S.T., II-II, 40.2)

As early as 1661 the colony of Massachusetts included in its charter the protection of “non-resisters.” However, during the Revolutionary war the law took a different turn, a “war tax” was imposed on those Quakers who refused to serve. In the original draft of the Second Amendment, Madison would have had the Bill of Rights protect the “religiously scrupulous” from being compelled to bear arms, but this provision was not adopted by the Congress.

Of course, the conscientious objector is not invariably guided by religious beliefs. The committed utilitarian might well conclude that the costs of war, properly assessed, make it wrongful under all circumstances. It is not clear, therefore, that some special dispensation is owed to those whose objections are religiously grounded. Put another way, it could be argued that one who refuses to comply with a provision of the law on the basis of a rational appraisal of the consequences has a claim to the same respect paid to one whose non-compliance is grounded in scripture. As will be noted, however, where dispensations allowed under United States law are not in response to a specific pleading based on religion, the pivotal question is whether the plaintiff’s motives function in the same way as those of the religiously devout.

Consider in this connection the *U.S. Army Regulation 600-43*, made effective in September of 2006. It pertains to gaining the status of conscientious objector in the event of a general mobilization. That status is denied when one’s objection is not to all war

but to a specific and certain war. Moreover, the applicant's request must be based on sincerity, as "determined by an impartial evaluation of each person's thinking and living in totality, past and present" and made evident by a record that includes "training in the home and church; general demeanor and pattern of conduct; participation in religious activities." Surely one might expect a devout Muslim to refuse to participate in a war against an Islamic state, though otherwise fully prepared to engage other enemies. Nor is it beyond all probability that an atheist, reared by atheists, might reach the settled position that a specific general mobilization is unwarranted and surely not worth the cost in life and treasure, including his own.

This very rationale, however, drawn out a bit further, would in principle provide an untold number and variety of dispensations just in case each of the objectors to one or another law were able to mount a rational justification or identify some relevant scriptural passages. The consequence would be the elimination of any workable rule of law. For this reason, attempts to include philosophical or social grounds of conscientious objection have had a mixed history in the U.S. courts. What has succeeded, however, is establishing that a moral code functions in the life of a given claimant in the way that a religious doctrine functions in the life of one who qualifies for the status of conscientious objector. This was made clear in *United States v. Seeger* (1965) where a unanimous Court stated the relevant criterion:

A sincere and meaningful belief which occupies in the life of its possessor a place parallel to that filled by the God of those admittedly qualifying for the exemption comes within the statutory definition.

(380 U.S., at 176)

Another point of tension is reached when a religious body or institution claims immunity from the reach of civil law. According to the *Times* of London (September 14, 2008), the UK has accepted rulings by *Sharia* tribunal courts since 2007 in areas with high concentrations of Muslims. These tribunals have settled a wide range of cases involving divorce, inheritance and child custody. In France, *Sharia* law has been accepted in the matter of certain financial transactions. As *Sharia* forbids gambling and the payment of interest on loans, such instruments as mortgages and savings accounts must be redrawn to be compliant with *Sharia* when used within Muslim communities. It should be recalled that the early Christian Church also condemned the assessment of interest on loans. As early as the Council of Nicea (325 CE) provisions of Canon Law rendered such practices impermissible:

This holy and great synod judges that if any are found after this decision to receive interest by contract or to transact the business in any other way or to charge a flat rate of fifty percent or in general to devise any other contrivance for the sake of dishonorable gain, they shall be deposed from the clergy and their names struck from the roll.

(Council of Nicea: Canon 17)

As of 2010 there has been no official acknowledgment of the authority of Islamic courts in the United States where a written Constitution forbids the national government from actions that favor the establishment of any religion. Although the First Amendment also denies to the Federal government the power to prohibit "the free

exercise” of religion, the Constitution as a whole would prevent *Sharia* compliance at any point at which individual and constitutionally guaranteed rights are jeopardized or where likely harm to persons is envisaged.

It is unnecessary to cite the very large number of unconstitutional provisions of *Sharia*. Consider, illustratively, the freedom adult citizens in the West enjoy to engage in legal forms of gambling and the consumption of alcoholic beverages. Both activities under *Sharia*, according to the relevant *Hadith*, would result in public flogging. In the West, such a public flogging administered by other citizens, including members of the clergy, would constitute an assault and would be so prosecuted. Consider also the treatment of homosexuality, which is expressly forbidden under Islamic law. The death penalty for sodomy is permitted in Iran, Mauritania, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia and Somalia. Over and against this, the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that: “The liberty protected by the Constitution allows homosexual persons the right to choose to enter upon relationships in the confines of their homes and their own private lives and still retain their dignity as free persons” (*Lawrence v. Texas* (2003) 539 U.S. 558: 3).

The general precepts now adopted by the U.S. Supreme Court in considering possible violations of the Establishment clause were set down by Chief Justice Burger in *Lemon v. Kurtzman* ((1971) 403 U.S. 602) resulting in the so-called “Lemon Test.” At issue in the case was the use of Rhode Island state funds to subsidize a religious institution for providing instruction in entirely secular subjects. The Lemon Test of the constitutionality of a statute has three specific conditionals: First, the statute must have a secular legislative purpose. Second, the principal effects of the statute must neither advance nor inhibit religion. Finally, the statute must not promote “an excessive government entanglement with religion.” Applying the Lemon Test to cases such as *Lawrence* points to the difficulties arising from the adoption of such criteria. There might be compelling grounds on which to disagree with the ruling in *Lawrence* but the ruling itself was designed to serve the secular purpose of extending the right of privacy to consenting adults. Nonetheless, in imposing such a ruling the Court surely would inhibit the application of religiously mandated punishments on offenders.

In 1948 the United Nations published its Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the wake of the atrocities of World War II. The *Preamble* affirms, “the inherent dignity and . . . the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family (as) the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.” Article 2, Sec. 4 of the same charter requires that “[a]ll Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state.” Since that time, a number of international bodies and courts have been formed to record violations of human rights and identify offending nations. At times, the designated committees and tribunals have included members from nations with records of human rights violations at once numerous, brutal and official. There have been attempts, some successful, to address violations with economic sanctions and even with military interventions, arguably in contravention of the provisions of Article 2 as cited. It is ostensibly less problematic when violations of individual rights are perpetrated by officials who are largely indistinguishable from criminals than when comparable violations proceed from the long-established tenets of a state religion. In both instances, however, there are both material and legal limits on just how far one collection of nations may proceed in controlling the affairs of another nation.

Nonetheless, on March 24, 1999, NATO forces took military action against the government of Yugoslavia. It was the first time NATO had made war on a U.N. mem-

ber state without U.N. authorization. The justification was framed in terms of human rights now violated by Yugoslavia's *de facto* program of "ethnic cleansing." The parties in conflict were divided along religious lines, the ethnic Albanians seeking to establish an independent and Muslim state. The resulting state would presumably impose the strictest versions of *Sharia* and thus be in violation of the U.N.'s understanding of universal human rights. What is clear is that the combination of a universalist perspective on rights and a firm commitment to national sovereignty constitute a collision course wherever there are state religions whose tenets leave little room for individual liberty.

The most formal and systematic attempt to avoid such collisions, or at least mitigate their consequences, is by way of a strict separation between the civil and the religious spheres of law and life. The dissenting groups who abandoned England and Europe for the New World were wary of any scheme that would centralize governmental power and extend its reach to matters of faith. Rhode Island was settled by those fleeing from the oppressive measures imposed on Dissenters in the Massachusetts Bay colony. English settlers in what is now New York, witnessing the persecution of Quakers mandated by Governor Peter Stuyvesant, drew up and signed a petition, the *Flushing Remonstrance* of 1657, the first official declaration of the right of religious freedom in the New World.

However, the movement of ideas and practices was uneven. In the colony of Maryland, settled primarily by Roman Catholics, the prevailing anti-Catholic sentiments in the New World resulted in Maryland being officially Church of England until 1776. What the U.S. Constitution established in the matter of church–state separation was a wall that would bar the *national* government from legislation that would either affirm an established religion or impose burdens on the manner in which religious freedom is exercised. At the outset, no such wall operated at the level of the individual states. A Massachusetts statute of 1780 required church membership, this legal provision not abolished until 1833. As late as 1802 Connecticut still preserved Congregationalism as the official state religion, disestablishment finally taking place in 1818. Similarly, New Hampshire Constitution restricted election to the State legislature to Protestants, this condition not waived until 1877. The Constitution of North Carolina disqualified atheists from holding public office. Although the abolition of these various "Test Acts" would be achieved by Article 6 of the U.S. Constitution—according to which, "no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States"—the separate states continued to apply earlier provisions of their respective constitutions.

It was Roger Williams, in his book, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution* (1867 [1644]), who first referred to a "hedge or wall of separation between the garden of the church and the wilderness of the world." This phrase would be made famous in Thomas Jefferson's letter of 1802 to the Baptist community of Danbury, Connecticut, fearful that the larger community of Congregationalists would restrict their religious freedom. Jefferson wrote reassuringly:

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his god, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their "legislature" should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thus building a wall of separation between church and State.

(Jefferson 1802)

John Locke's *Two Treatises of Civil Government* (1965 [1689]) was among the most widely reprinted works of the eighteenth century. In this seminal political treatise, Locke looks less to Newton than to Stoic philosophy in arguing that

the Law of Nature stands as an Eternal Rule to all Men, *Legislators* as well as others. The *Rules* that they make for other Men's Actions, be conformable to the Law of Nature, i.e. to the Will of God, of which that is a Declaration, and the *fundamental Law of Nature* being the *preservation of Mankind*, no Humane Sanction can be good, or valid against it.

(Locke 1965 [1689]: 358)

To invoke a universal law of nature as dispositive in human affairs is to assume something about human nature itself that goes beyond social conventions and cultural nuances. It is to assume something *essential* about human nature, against which human sanctions themselves cannot safely or validly prevail. This is the understanding on which depend the universal rights now acknowledged and protected by international tribunals. Theism was the originating perspective that gave birth to such universalistic conceptions of law.

Alternative and secular foundations have been proposed but have not made any greater progress toward universal acceptance and application. Stripped of explicit theistic concepts, law can be required to satisfy fundamental moral principles by way of an argument of the following sort: Sovereign states and even isolated tribal communities routinely assert immunity against the reach of the international community which itself is but a collection of politically sovereign entities. Arguments favoring non-interference are not without weight and grant the widest latitude to the laws and practices of other sovereign entities. However, from a moral point of view, the geographic boundaries that establish the domain of such sovereignty are, in the end, no more than the contingent and shifting facts of geopolitics. As such, the boundaries are not *essentially* anything. Their sovereignty resides not in measures of latitude and longitude but in the resident persons. Accordingly, the fact that a given practice takes place here rather than there, or now rather than then, expresses nothing of an essential nature. But the vulnerabilities, powers and moral worth of the residents are essential features and, as such, are the grounds of respect, now typically identified as “rights.” Were it otherwise, there could be no crimes against humanity, no world Court, no international human rights commission—in brief, none of the modern apparatus designed to protect the vulnerable, punish the offender and otherwise record what a rational creature takes to be essential to a fully human form of life.

Related Topics

Chapter 13: Evidence; Chapter 25: Moral Inquiry; Chapter 31: Civil Society; Chapter 32: Human Rights; Chapter 36: Religious Diversity; Chapter 39: Bioethics

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Recommended Reading

- Berg, T. C. (2008) *The Free Exercise of Religion Clause: The First Amendment*, New York: Prometheus Books. This work examines the historical background of religious freedom and the challenges of drawing the proper boundary between religious freedom and legal duties. It examines the statutory protection of religious freedom as well as protections secured by judicial decisions.
- Feldman, S. (2000) *Law and Religion: A Critical Anthology*, New York: New York University Press. Feldman presents both the political left and right, as well as cultural, philosophical, sociological and historical perspectives on the proper relationship between law and religion.
- Griffin, L. C. (2009) *Law and Religion: Cases and Materials*, 2nd edition, New York: Foundation Press. This edition features an interdisciplinary approach to law and religion, including background materials on religions involved in cases and readings about comparative religion. The comparative law sections analyze international protection of religious freedom in comparison and contrast with U.S. law.
- Lubin, T., D. R. Davis Jr. and J. K. Krishnan (2010) *Hinduism and Law: An Introduction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. This book begins with the earliest Sanskrit rule books and moves through to the codification of "Hindu law" in modern times. The work is interdisciplinary, examining major transformations to India's legal system in both the colonial and post colonial periods and their relation to recent changes in Hinduism.
- Novak, D. (1998) *Natural Law in Judaism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Novak argues that Natural Law Theory, generally associated with Aquinas, is an integral feature of law as understood within Judaism; moreover, that it is consistent with both revelation and tradition.
- Peters, F. E. (ed.), (1994) *A Reader in Classical Islam*, Ch. 5: "The Quran, the Prophet, and the Law," Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. The author draws upon the Islamic texts and offers an exegetical treatise on Islamic religious culture as a whole. Material is taken from historical and legal sources from the earliest days of Islam to the fifteenth century.
- Witte, J. and F. Alexander (2008) *Christianity and Law: An Introduction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. This is a concise and authoritative introduction to the legal teachings of the Western Christian tradition as developed in the texts and traditions of scripture and theology, philosophy and jurisprudence.

FEMINISM

*Pamela Sue Anderson***Introduction: Theism and/or Feminism**

Theism and feminism have been treated as opposites. In the contexts where feminist philosophers have been shaped by Anglo-American object-relations psychology (Chodorow 1989: 108–13), or Feuerbachian projection theory (Feuerbach 1957), “theism” is the conception of an omniscient, omnipotent, omni-benevolent, omnipresent, eternal or everlasting God who is in fact the ego-ideal for a male subject. This God has been held to possess aseity; He is complete in Himself, not needing to depend on any other being (Hampson 1996: 124–5; 2009a: 174–6). In such contexts, the contrast of “theism” to “feminism” is sharp. Feminism represents the exact opposite of the former, what might be called masculinist theism.

The contrasting form of feminist theism seeks a conception of the ego-ideal for a female subject; the feminist theist prizes the need for relations with others, especially with the divine. In this way, when opposed to masculinist theism, feminists still face a choice in how they interpret their relation to theism. Theism and feminism are either incompatible, so one or the other must be given up, or, as “opposites,” they might be conceived to co-exist alongside each other, insofar as there is a God for men and a God for women.

Obviously, there is a third alternative (and possibly, more alternatives, depending on how the terms “theism” and “feminism” are understood). Feminists and theists can reject the psychological and anthropological interpretations of God as either an ego-ideal or as a projection of human love that needs to be “brought down to earth.” However, since the most prominent trends of feminism in philosophy of religion are driven by the subject-centered interpretations of psychology and of anthropology, the two dominant trends are worth our serious consideration.

So, on the one hand, the terms “theist” and “feminist” are employed by contemporary philosophers of religion who follow the French psycholinguistic and Feuerbachian theories of Luce Irigaray, to describe separate, yet potentially compatible positions. On the other hand, as incompatible opposites, theism or feminism implies a choice: a feminist philosopher must give up the theistic conception of a God who has been conceived to empower men (with the so-called omni-attributes) and not women (Hampson 1996: 102, 123–5), or she must give up her feminism.

Feminism and Theism in French Philosophy

If a feminist philosopher is going to escape from the theistic ideal of the male subject who is, in the words of the French existentialist Simone de Beauvoir, “the essential”

(since he is created in the image of his God), then she must resist being “the inessential.” To become a female subject the Beauvoirian feminist resists being treated as an object and, thus, reduced to “the sex” (Beauvoir 2009: 6). The trend in feminist philosophy of religion which builds on, while revising, Beauvoir will be represented in this chapter by the early writings of the American feminist Mary Daly. Daly’s later feminism could also be said to come close to Irigaray’s attempts to create a feminism of difference.

Despite the diversity of views within feminism, there is some agreement in tackling the sexism which has marred theism. In order to become fully a subject of philosophy, a woman has to transcend any patriarchal conception of a divine-human and a man-woman hierarchy of demeaning gendered roles and values. In the terms of the French philosopher Michèle Le Doeuff, the woman philosopher refuses to become “a kind of nothingness in the eyes of the other” (2007: 280).

What about the psychological and anthropological interpretations of women who succumb to their devalued roles in masculinist theism? Irigaray’s psycholinguistic reading of Feuerbach’s projection theory is a paradigmatic case for maintaining the opposition of theism–feminism. Yet Irigaray also proposes the potential compatibility of a male subject with a God for himself and a female subject—a god or goddess—for a woman. Her essays “Divine Women” (1993) and “Toward a Divine in the Feminine” (2009) present an ethic of sexual difference for divine women and divine men in the starkest terms. She argues that a God in the feminine is equally as necessary as a God in the masculine. Only with their two different and respective ideals can the female and male subjects become complete; each can become a subject with her or his own integrity by, first, projecting and, second, reclaiming their gender ideals, especially ideals for their love relations. The obvious question to Irigaray and her theism is: why would a feminist philosopher of religion simply assume that God is no more than an ideal for the becoming of a human subject?

One answer is that a feminist philosopher educated according to the European norms of post-Hegelian philosophy—whether of Feuerbach, Nietzsche or Freud—simply assumes that “theism” plays a concrete role in the moral and spiritual development of (relations of) love between human persons. Not unlike the Anglo-American philosopher of religion, the European philosopher of religion begins with an assumption about the God of theism. Generally speaking, the Christian Anglo-American philosopher of religion assumes—and defends—the seventeenth-century philosopher’s conception of a single Creator-God who is omniscient, omnipotent, all good, omnipresent, eternal or everlasting, and who is a being that does not depend on any other being for its existence. In contrast, generally the European philosopher of religion assumes the nineteenth-century philosopher’s belief that a Father and a Son in God who embrace each other with the intense love that natural relations alone inspire, should be replaced with the belief that this natural love and unity is immanent in man himself; this reduction of God to man happens by embracing the real life of the family, with an intimate bond of love as naturally moral and divine.

In other words, the conception of theism assumed by philosophers of religion who follow the nineteenth-century philosophies of Feuerbach, Marx and Nietzsche take it for granted that “God” is replaced with “man” in the moral and spiritual development of loving human subjects. This is like growing up with a belief in “Father Christmas” or “Santa Claus” and eventually replacing it with “Daddy.” A feminist philosopher in this European tradition would also seek a “God” who can serve initially as her ideal, so that her “God” can eventually be replaced by “woman” (or, “mother”?). Irigaray insists that

both theism and its reversal, which ensure a sexual difference between men and women, are necessary for the future of religion and morality (Irigaray 1993).

It could be argued that the main concern of the present chapter is with feminism in Anglo-American philosophy of religion, not in European philosophy or anthropology of religion. However, when it comes to feminism and theism it might not be easy to maintain a sharp distinction between the feminism(s) in European and in Anglo-American contexts. For example, the first woman philosopher-theologian in the Anglo-American world of philosophy of religion, Mary Daly, challenged Thomist arguments and the conception of a single Creator-God who is omniscient, omnipotent, all good, omnipresent, eternal or everlasting. For some, Daly formulates a decisive argument against Christian monotheism, drawing on the European traditions of feminism (e.g., Beauvoir), philosophy (e.g., Nietzsche) and theology (e.g., Tillich).

An Early Example: Theism and *Beyond God the Father*

Daly (1928–2010) was one of the first American women to train as a Roman Catholic theologian, completing doctorates both in theology and in philosophy. This philosophical-theological education gave Daly the critical tools both to challenge the God of traditional Christian theism and to propose an alternative to the being of this God. Daly became a controversial feminist; she was criticized for her audacity in proclaiming the sexism of theism and celebrated for her creativity (at least by some feminist “theists”) in eventually formulating a radical lesbian feminist philosophy of liberation/religion. Her initial critique of Christian theism appeared in *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (1973) where she sought to expose the sexism in theistic doctrines of God as both Father, God the Son, and Creator of a paradise in which man would fall from his original perfection when seduced by Eve. Daly criticizes the theistic problems of evil and of divine omnipotence. Claiming to “exorcize evil from Eve,” Daly exposes the sexism at the heart of the theist’s solutions to innocent suffering and a free “human” subject; that is, women’s sexually specific suffering is ratified by Eve, while human freedom and divine power are given to the new Adam.

Daly’s feminist position in *Beyond God the Father* might not appear radical to our contemporary secular society (or to Daly’s own later writings). At this early stage, she remains within the Christian church and theism. Although when it appeared Daly’s critique of Christian theism shocked both men and women, she is still rarely studied by contemporary Anglo-American philosophers of religion. Yet she did not go unnoticed by the Roman Catholic authorities who were targeted by her philosophy of women’s liberation for their patriarchal hierarchy of values which, she claimed, unfairly oppressed women and hindered women’s education.

Daly herself grew up in a Roman Catholic community as the only child of a poor Irish couple. She attended a private liberal arts college for women, the College of Saint Rose in Albany, New York, founded by Roman Catholic Sisters. As Daly records in her 1992 autobiography, although keen to study philosophy, as a woman she could obtain a B.A. only in English from the College of Saint Rose. So, she went to do a Ph.D. in Religion at St Mary’s College in Notre Dame, Indiana. After this, she went abroad in order to achieve—finally—her doctorates in theology (1963) and in philosophy (1965) at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland.

At the time, the medieval town of Fribourg had a very traditional Roman Catholic university. Even so, Fribourg allowed Daly possibilities denied to her at Catholic col-

leges in the USA. In particular, she managed to read relatively easily the contemporary European philosophy, especially the existentialist philosophy of Beauvoir, and the liberal theology of Tillich which were popular in Europe during the period 1959–65. In this way, Daly's intellectual and feminist insights were freely cultivated in the European context of radical change, including those proposed by the Second Vatican Council.

In the 1960s, Daly herself would come to considerable public attention in the UK and the USA. In 1963, she was asked by a British publisher to write *The Church and the Second Sex* (1968). Although this publication contains a relatively moderate and tentative argument for gender equality, the controversy generated by *The Church and the Second Sex* prevented Daly's first two-year contract at the Jesuit-run Boston College, Massachusetts, from being renewed. Incredibly, the failure of Boston College to renew Daly's contract became *un cause célèbre* when more than 1,500 students at the college and many others in universities across the USA protested, forcing the Board of Boston College to reinstate Daly. As a radical lesbian feminist Daly would continue to face obstacles at the Jesuit-run college. Although she gained tenure and taught at Boston College for more than thirty years, she was, in the end, forced to retire in 1999 following a legal case that was made against Daly's separatist policy of not allowing men to attend her women's studies classes.

Daly is a good case-study of feminism and theism in the Anglo-American world precisely because she is motivated by European philosophy and theology, while her feminist struggle for gender equality supports a radical critique of theism. In particular, she seeks to subvert the theistic ratification of the myth of woman as the Other, that is, as the second sex. "The Second Sex" in the title of Daly's publication brought to mind Simone de Beauvoir's *Le deuxième sexe* (1949). The similarity between Beauvoir and Daly is noteworthy insofar as each of these feminists insists that women are not born but become. They either become man's Other or become subjects in their own right. Theistic norms are understood to determine the moral and religious development of the (hu)man subject and his Other. The object of Daly's critique—Christian theism—is both compatible with and is challenged by the existential position that a man's freedom as *pour-soi* required a woman's subordination as *en-soi*. In this way, Beauvoir's philosophical account of the systematic subordination of women in Western society and culture by the myth of femininity informs Daly's theological account of the doctrinal subordination of women by the patriarchal theism of "the Church."

Yet it is noteworthy that at the early stage in her intellectual development Daly, unlike Beauvoir, does not immediately dismiss Roman Catholicism on feminist grounds. Instead, in *Beyond God the Father* Daly calls for philosophers of religion to rethink the theistic conception of God, especially the divine attributes of omnipotence, immutability and providence. *Beyond God the Father* argues against the immutable, providential power of the God of monotheism. This philosophical argument still holds potential interest for contemporary philosophy of religion. Daly's feminist rethinking of theism draws intelligently on existentialism, while also exhibiting significant knowledge of Thomism. Taken literally, *Beyond God the Father* argues that the fatherhood of God with all his "omni"-attributes should be transcended, if women are to be liberated from patriarchal oppression. After Daly's use of "transcendence," this concept will be taken up by later generations of feminist philosophers of religion as an alternative to the concept of an anthropomorphic God (Anderson 2010).

Daly herself claims to locate her critique of theism "not merely on the boundary between these (male-created) disciplines [of philosophy and theology], but on the

boundary of both, because it speaks out of the experience of that half of the human species which has been represented in neither discipline" (Daly 1986 [1973]: 6). From this dual-location, Daly proposes new concepts of God and of human consciousness for a philosophy of women's liberation. As she writes: "The becoming of women implies universal human becoming. It has everything to do with the search for ultimate meaning and reality, which some would call God" (ibid.). Her transformation of theism aims to allow for "human becoming," but it was and is not only directed to Roman Catholics or Christian theists, but to the 1960s' "women's revolution" and, it must be said, to contemporary feminist theists.

For Daly, the emancipation from "God as Father" is liberation from a "God being male" and so "male being God." This emancipation points beyond the idolatries of sexist society and its gender hierarchies. Daly proposes that "the courage to be" is the key to "the revelatory power" of the feminist revolution. The freedom for both women and men as subjects to search for the ultimate meaning of reality is revelatory in uncovering what some would call a dynamic God. Perhaps Daly's most significant philosophical proposal in her philosophy of women's liberation is that the theistic conception of God can no longer be thought of as a noun. Instead "God" is a verb. God is "the most active and dynamic of all [verbs]." Her conception of becoming has similarities to Beauvoir's existentialism and the role of a dynamic process of freedom in becoming who we are. However, this conception of becoming (gendered subjects) was and still is problematic, in fixating bi-gender stereotypes.

In her later writings, Daly renounces Christianity completely, becoming one of the first self-proclaimed "post-Christian" feminists. Daly replaces Catholic theology with a creative use of language. *Gyn/Ecology: The Meta-Ethics of Radical Feminism* (1978); *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy* (1984); *Outercourse: The Be-Dazzling Voyage* (1993); *Quintessence* (1998) are some of her provocative titles. These argue for a radical post-Christian feminism which no longer advocated any form of theism. However, Daly's creative genius in philosophy (of religion) continued to point to deep emotional psychological and spiritual problems in the lives of women and, indirectly, of men.

Feminism and Later Feminist Forms of Theism

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, feminist interventions into philosophical debates about Christian theism continue. However, in contemporary feminist philosophy of religion, the feminist attempts to engage with non-Christian theism have been sharply dismissed (see Coakley 2005; cf. Anderson 1998). Due to strong resistance, feminist interventions into global theisms are perhaps less persuasive—and certainly less radical—than Daly's early and later interventions into Western theism. Anglo-American philosophy of religion has been slow to study Daly, and even slower to recognize the history of "feminism" in theism (Anderson 2008).

Certain indications exist that a transformation of the field of philosophy of religion is, however gradually, happening. "Theism" is slowly being seen in more than Christian forms; and the tweaking of gender-terms and of gendered examples on the fringes of theists' arguments is under way. More radical change would seem to be inevitable, if the arguments put forth about "a future theism" by feminist theologians who follow after Daly such as Grace M. Jantzen and Daphne Hampson are taken seriously. Jantzen and Hampson have each tirelessly challenged the philosopher as "the theistic man-God." Their descriptions of the deified male subject of theism stand for all that has been

thought to be positive and neutral in philosophy (of religion); they are being shown as far from that. For too long, “the theist” has been socially and materially located and represented by a particular group of Christian male philosophers. Yet “he,” the Christian philosopher, has increasingly been forced by political, social and ethical pressures to recognize his gender and the “male-neutral” perspectives of his theistic beliefs and practices (Anderson 1998: 13).

Broadly speaking, feminists in philosophy of religion would like the philosopher to see how his relation to, and concept of, “God” has served as his ego-ideal, excluding all that is not the male ideal. As a kind of nothingness alongside the full purity of the man of reason, the female body has been, in Julia Kristeva’s terms, abject, polluted, defiled and devalued (Kristeva 1982). In the history of the philosophy of religion, it is not only the female body, but the female intellect which has been metaphorically and literally associated with the “other” side of philosophy. In some feminist debates in philosophy of religion, the female way of knowing continues to be associated with the “soft” edges of philosophy rather than with the “hard core” of (male) philosophy; the latter is represented by the all-powerful being of God whose hard ego-boundaries serve as the male ideal of the subject without dependence on any other. These distorted stereotypical and generally self-deluded images in philosophy are to be, and in some locations have been, addressed. But these are, it must be said, only the tip of an iceberg.

Women such as Jantzen and Hampson have attempted to expose the gendered nature of the traditional theist’s ways of knowing in philosophy of religion, while questioning “the master’s own tools” within analytic philosophy of religion. Jantzen and Hampson have each also proposed alternative forms of theism for feminism. This is in sharp contrast to a feminist theologian within analytical philosophy of religion such as Sarah Coakley who attempts to gender the field by locating the feminine soft-spots within philosophical texts (cf. Coakley 2005). The problem with the latter is that Coakley leaves the much deeper dangers of theism and its masculinist injustices untouched.

Knowing the difference between surface changes to gender stereotypes and deep shifts aimed at uncovering and alleviating the pernicious injustices of theism has been strongly advocated by Jantzen in her proposals for an Irigarayan-inspired project of “becoming divine,” culminating in an Irigarayan-like pantheism (Jantzen 1997: 266–85; 2004: 28–41). Jantzen is not afraid of bold contentions for women and pantheism as a timely form for a new, broadly construed, “theism.” Jantzen argues that “the idea of divine embodiment” is not merely “an adjustment to classical theism”; it is “a disruption of the dualistic and hierarchical western symbolic” (Jantzen 1997: 283). Her insistence upon pantheism informs her feminist appropriation of Irigaray’s “divine as a horizon of becoming.” For Jantzen, this means “exploring the embodied, earthed, female divine as ‘the perfection of our subjectivity’” (Jantzen 1997: 283). Here she affirms Irigaray’s urging that we must not be “awaiting the god passively, but bringing the god to life through us” (Jantzen 1997: 283; cf. Irigaray 1993: 63).

Similar to Jantzen in one sense at least, Hampson’s proposal for a new form of theism draws inspiration from Irigaray’s insistence on women’s relational differences to men (Hampson 1996: 213–53; 2009a: 171–86). However, Hampson’s crucial distinctness is her insistence upon a move away from anthropomorphism and from a Feuerbachian projection of either an ideal male self or an ideal female self. Instead, Hampson wipes “the slate clean of an anthropomorphically conceived God, be ‘he’ more or less, powerful,” in order to reconceive theism as “a conviction that there is more to reality than meets the eye; that there are powers on which we may draw; that we are profoundly

connected with what is in excess of what we are" (1996: 253). At an early stage in her theistic proposal, Hampson admits that a valid question is whether she should use the word "God" for what she intends. However, at later stages, she clearly and confidently employs "God" in carefully crafted phrases for a future theism. For example, she speaks of her conception of the reality of theism as "that which is of God" (2009a). She also argues that "[o]n both epistemological and moral grounds it is incumbent upon us to speak otherwise of that love and power which we may truly name 'God'" (Hampson 2009b: 76). Hampson tries to carve out the reality of God by attending to the experiences of women and of men who do not identify with the anthropomorphic omni-attributes of the traditional theistic God, but who still *hold onto* the idea of the self's relations to God. Hampson insists that we have misunderstood God because we have based "God" on a misconception of the self.

"God" has been seen as monadic; this concept has then been projected as an anthropomorphic other, transcendent over us. But our experience suggests a very different understanding as to what it is that God may be. We should be considering the way in which, across its boundaries, the self lies open to that which is beyond itself, such that we are intimately connected with "God." We no longer have time for a concept of God as a discrete monad, set over against us in hierarchal fashion, such that God's strength and goodness serves but to show up our weakness and sinfulness.

(Hampson 2009a: 176–7)

The above passage alone might not appear to say anything about feminism. But behind Hampson's argument for a reconceptualization of theism is an awareness of feminist arguments such as Daly's against God the Father who as Creator retains all the power, while Eve personifies weakness and sinfulness by leading Adam to fall from a state of perfection. Moreover, Hampson has attended to the history of conceptions of God and to the evidence of religious experiences of that which is beyond and exceeds the self—as something women might have known—but that men have not known insofar as they have conceptualized God as "above," as eternal, changeless, that is, like a Platonic form which is completely transcendent of the human body and physical world. Instead, insists Hampson, God must be found through human discernment and through openness to the world.

As a self-declared post-Christian feminist theologian, Hampson might not (yet) be known to contemporary philosophers of religion. However, in recent years Hampson's arguments for understanding the non-anthropomorphic reality of God offer much to those feminist philosophers interested in contemporary theism (Hampson 1996, 2009a, 2009b, 2010). Hampson conceives a theism which is ethically and epistemologically consistent with gender equality, but without the dangers of projecting ideal male or female attributes onto God and then having to retrieve them for oneself (Hampson 2009a: 172–8). In the end, Hampson aims to render feminism and theism compatible by reconceiving God.

Feminist "Methods" within Theism

The focus of this chapter so far has been largely on conceptions of theism and of feminism as different ways of understanding male and female subjects in relation to the

divine. However, feminism in philosophy of religion also manifests itself in its gender assessment of the practices of theism. Theistic practice includes the methods employed to justify theistic beliefs as rational, but also the methods employed to gain access to the divine. Hampson advocates a non-technical method for accessing God through the self's openness and active attention to the reality which is the world and the relations in that world. However, there are feminists in philosophy of religion who push the idea of intimate relations to God much further, advocating sexually specific experiences of God as intimacy with the divine.

For example, Coakley advocates that Christian women embrace their "power in weakness" before God (Coakley 1996). She works out her feminism within theism and the field of Christian analytical philosophy of religion. She claims to exploit the blind spots in the dominant methods of Anglo-American philosophers of religion for feminist ends (Coakley 2002: 25–39, 98–105; cf. Anderson 2002). In this process of gendering some of the key core texts in the field, Coakley has examined the arguments for theism presented by William Alston, Richard Swinburne, Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff with an eye to any significant gendered ways of knowing. She unravels the gendered standpoints concealed in Alston's notion of doxastic practice of Christian devotion, exploits the places in Swinburne's argument for the existence of God where he exposes a soft epistemic center, say, of reliance on others or on trust, and brings out the elements of vulnerability expressed in Wolterstorff's conception of belief and Plantinga's proper basicity. Her contention is that despite themselves these (male) philosophers bring in what they elsewhere devalue as feminine forms of subjectivity, including trust, vulnerability and suffering. Traces of traditionally feminine qualities indicate places at which feelings, including erotic passion, reveal a bodily relationship between human and divine. Coakley's gendering of our ways of knowing has been revealing and significant for feminist philosophy of religion.

And yet, if the methodological practice of exposing gender soft-spots is extended beyond the practices of a core group of Anglo-American Christian analytic philosophers of religion, the content of gender becomes problematic; that is, what Coakley identifies as gendered properties cannot be easily fixed onto men or onto women outside this social grouping. Moreover, the idea that either men or women in theism should cultivate their weakness, their vulnerability and other soft dimensions of their philosophical virtues for theism and feminism has become increasingly dubious (Anderson 2002, 2008, 2010). Coakley's "feminist" method in assessing theistic practices is undermined by her mistaken assumptions about gender and sweeping generalizations about gendered virtues. Moreover, Coakley advocates no change to the dominant conception of the God of Christian theism in Western philosophy of religion. Although, to be fair, she does offer a legitimate defence of Christian theism for women and for men. For Christian "feminists," this might be sufficient.

Nevertheless, if considered more closely by a feminist philosopher, Coakley's theological use of the distinction between the hard, masculine way of knowing and what is said to be the soft epistemic center of philosophers' texts will appear to keep women and the feminine where masculinist theists want them: that is, in a different sphere which can, at most, inform the male philosopher's "feminine" side. Coakley's feminist method associates feminine virtues with softness, intimacy and sexuality. Her appeal to women's experiences of sexually specific intimacy with a male God and to the feminine emotional capacities which they can share, even with masculine theists, is provocative. Recognizing gender differences for the theist leads Coakley to advocate sharing

characteristically feminine and characteristically masculine qualities between women and men. However, she does not explicitly question whether these feminine “virtues” of vulnerability and weakness are constructed strictly in relation to, and exclusively for access to, a God whose very nature depends upon a hierarchy of masculine over feminine virtues.

Coakley claims that the author’s project in *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (1998) eclipses “any intimacy with the divine” (Coakley 2005). Yet this claim contains an uncritical assumption that intimacy “with the divine” is an unquestionably positive possibility. No question of self-deception (whether this intimacy is more than narcissism or bad faith) or the dangers of abuse by the other (whether by actual men or by the masculinist projection of omnipotence) are raised when it comes to intimacy with the male God of theism. Moreover, to assume that one eclipses intimacy runs the danger of projecting on to her an unfair intention. To be fair, one should be assessed in relation to her own feminist aim to avoid the real physical and ethical dangers in being a kind of nothingness in the eyes of the other.

The author urges every woman to avoid an eclipse of herself by the other, especially to resist the way in which women have both demeaned themselves and been eclipsed by a man’s patriarchal God. Beauvoir and Le Doeuff, but also Daly and Irigaray, each expose the pernicious nature of theism which has damaged the nascent female subject by imposing values which not only lack equality for women (to men), but ratify the innocent suffering of women who, like Eve, are “abjected” precisely because of their knowledge of good and evil (Anderson 2010; cf. Kristeva 1982). Although neither Beauvoir nor Le Doeuff advocates—as Irigaray does and as the later Daly comes close to—becoming divine (i.e., creating the divine out of a woman’s gender), they both speak insightfully, on the one hand, to the problems of a debilitating narcissism and, on the other hand, of an absolute altruism whereby a woman becomes a kind of nothingness in men’s eyes for his use and his abuse (cf. Le Doeuff 2007: 278–80).

Without a balance of equality and reciprocity between male and female subjects to ensure the justice of interpersonal relations, theism can easily reinforce the problem of a self-annihilating mysticism within patriarchal societies. Admittedly, justice is not the only goal of women in contemporary philosophy of religion. Even today some feminist political theorists, feminist psychologists and feminist philosophers would argue that an ethics of care, like an ethics of sexual difference which sustains loving relations, remains in a problematic tension with liberal theories of distributive justice whose goal is equality. The choice between love and justice is not straightforward. An Irigarayan feminism of sexual difference tends to prize love and human relations over formal claims to equality. It is especially difficult for Christian theists simply to dismiss Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference out of fear that love between men and women will eclipse justice and equality. Love, as agape, over equality is traditionally more attractive to Christians.

Nevertheless, it is at least arguable that Beauvoir’s ethical critique of “the second sex” anticipates—by almost thirty years—the serious dangers of Irigaray’s assumptions concerning the divinized female body as the necessary, other-half of love. Uncovering the pernicious dangers of female narcissism as Beauvoir had seen it within the context of her particular French Catholic upbringing remains important as a form of suspicion, or critique, of masculinist theism. And yet, as has been seen here, neither Beauvoir nor Daly offers a completely fair picture of theism either. There is little doubt that Beauvoir’s own account of Roman Catholic theism, female mysticism and the female-in-love remains limited by her early twentieth-century preoccupation with equality. Jantzen,

Hampson and Coakley would each have very different things to say about the female mystic and her desire for intimacy with God.

Beauvoir herself sees a stark choice between an annihilation of the body of the female mystic in her love of self/god or a transcendence of the body by the female mystic. But she finds one positive example of a female mystic: Teresa of Avila, who, she claims, avoids paranoia and decisively debilitating narcissism. According to Beauvoir, Teresa's achievement is due to the mystic's situated autonomy and reciprocity in her practical projects. This kind of mysticism shapes, according to Beauvoir, women of action who know very well what goals they have in mind and who lucidly devise means for attaining them. Their visions provide objective images for their certitudes, encouraging such practically minded mystics to persist in the paths they have mapped out in detail for themselves. Disagreements within feminism often land on the question of feminine and masculine values, virtues or methods. It is possible that Beauvoir trusts the objective methods and practical outcomes of mysticism, while Irigaray, Coakley and possibly Jantzen would mistrust this "objectivity." Instead they would undoubtedly advocate the feminist virtues of holding fast to subjective truth and emotion-based connectedness.

Conclusion

To end with, perhaps, the most quoted—and contentious—statement about women and theism, Irigaray asserts: "The only diabolical thing about women is their lack of a God" (Irigaray 1993: 64). This assertion challenges the form of theism which has excluded or devalued women, leaving them without a god of their own, while deifying men. Clearly, the claim that women lack a God in their own image is not only contentious, but provocative. Irigaray's statement assumes that God has been no more than an ego-ideal for the male subject. In other words, theism as a conception of an omniscient, omnipotent, omni-benevolent, omnipresent, eternal or everlasting God who has aseity is—according to the psychologist and the anthropologist—merely a projection of an exclusively male ideal.

As shown in this chapter, the Irigarayan critique of Christian theism has helped to expose male supremacy in the form of an exclusively masculinist projection of love relations onto God the Father. Accompanying this critique is Irigaray's imperative that each woman seeks a direct relation to a God of her own gender. Her imperative assumes that "God" functions as the projection of human gender onto an ideal; and that the latter needs to become both the ground and the goal for a subject's gender identity. And yet, this latter assumption could easily be part of the problem: gender could have functioned in this manner, in the mind and in the cultures of men globally, but to the detriment of women. So, deification has enabled men to achieve both great and diabolical things, that is, diabolical when it comes to their treatment of women. At the very least, Irigarayan feminism teaches us that theism should take more seriously the psychological and anthropological critiques of our personal relations, especially when theistic philosophers have the power to shape these relations and to make claims for concrete life and love.

Without the various philosophical critiques which have been developed within feminism, the danger of failure would remain for the philosopher who holds an abstract conception of theism. His failure would be not to hear and/or to understand the innocent cries of women and of men who have been destroyed by the absolute power, the narrowly defined providence and the exclusive purposes of male supremacists in the name of their God.

Related Topics

Chapter 1: Western Philosophy; Chapter 11: Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Intellectual Life; Chapter 19: Philosophical Methodology; Chapter 20: Philosophy of Religion; Chapter 23: Psychology; Chapter 31: Civil Society; Chapter 47: Narrative; Chapter 48: Community

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Recommended Reading

- Anderson, P. S. (ed.), (2010) *New Topics in Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Contestations and Transcendence Incarnate*, Dordrecht/London/New York: Springer. This collection of essays offers new possibilities for theism, by drawing on both Anglo-American and European philosophers of religion to conceive of God in terms compatible with feminism as “transcendence incarnate,” including an essay by Daphne Hampson, “Kant and the Present,” pp. 147–60.
- Howie, G. and J. Jobling (eds), (2009) *Women and the Divine: Touching Transcendence*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan. A collection of essays on women and the divine, especially useful for those philosophers interested in theism and Irigarayan or French-inspired feminism, including Irigaray’s original piece “Toward a Divine in the Feminine,” pp. 13–26.
- Joy, M. (2006) *Divine Love: Luce Irigaray, Women, Gender and Religion*, Manchester: Manchester University Press. This monograph is far more than a text on Irigaray, developing a contrast between Irigaray and Levinas, and comparing Irigaray and Daly; Joy offers material on feminism and God for anyone wondering what has happened to divine love through the demise of traditional Christian theism.
- Joy, M. (ed.), (2011) *Continental Philosophy and Philosophy of Religion. Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 4, Dordrecht/London/New York: Springer. This ground-breaking collection of essays for philosophy of religion has some wonderfully original pieces about European theism, including Joy’s own chapter on Ricœur, Ellen T. Armour on Derrida, plus Bettina Bergo’s *tour de force* on Levinas.
- Soskice, J. M. (2007) *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender and Religious Language*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. This small gem of a book contains an overall argument, across nine fairly discrete chapters, for Christian theism upholding a non-pernicious form of sexual relations.

RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

Victoria S. Harrison

This chapter explores some of the connections between religious diversity and theism, beginning with a brief review of the scope and meaning of the terms “religion” and “religious diversity.” A discussion of why religious diversity is sometimes thought to be problematic prepares the ground for a look at some of the ways in which it has been deployed within arguments for atheism or agnosticism. After outlining some possible responses to these arguments, attention turns to religious pluralism—a theory that, in various forms, is widely held today. The chapter closes by shifting focus from the mooted problems diversity raises for theistic belief and, instead, suggests some reasons why we might find religious diversity valuable.

What Do We Mean by “Religious Diversity”?

The first and most obvious observation is that “religion” is a notoriously difficult term to define (see Harrison 2006a), and the difficulties here inevitably carry over to attempts to define “religious diversity.” In everyday contexts, most people use the term “religion” without seeking to define it. Hence it can come as a surprise to learn that there is little agreement among scholars about what religion is—and hence about which phenomena should be classed as religious. Nonetheless, debates about both of these issues are serious and far-reaching. At their core is a dispute about whether religion actually is something out there in the world that exists independently of our habitual ways of thinking about it and awaiting our classification, or, instead, is an artificial creation of nineteenth-century European scholarship. (See McCutcheon 1997 for a defense of the latter view, and Harrison 2007 for a critical discussion.)

Nowadays we routinely think and talk about so-called “world religions,” but this has not always been the case. Our current use of this term presupposes that we have a concept—“religion”—which we use to recognize and classify a wide range of beliefs and practices found in different parts of the world. This might seem unproblematic until we pause to consider the origin of our concept of religion. Was it simply given to us through observation of the world? It does not seem so. In fact, the concept was derived by means of extrapolation from that form of religion which was practiced by the majority in Western Europe during the onset of scholarship on religion during the nineteenth century. The concept was thus primarily responsive to Western Christianity. The result was that any set of beliefs and practices that looked similar enough to Western Christianity could be classified as falling under the concept of religion, and anything that was too remote from it could not; this explains why belief systems such as Daoism, that are very unlike Western Christianity, can only be classed as religion with strain.

It was natural then to regard Judaism and Islam as religions because in many respects they are similar to Western Christianity. However, the term “religion” was also deployed to refer to a vast array of beliefs and practices “discovered” by modern Western scholars on the Indian subcontinent. Many of these came to be categorized together under the term “Hinduism.” It is commonly acknowledged nowadays that this term is little more than a term of convenience used to refer to an array of very different beliefs and practices (see the chapters on Asian Philosophy and Hindu Theism earlier in this volume). It is less commonly acknowledged that the term “religion” is also little more than a term of convenience—used to group together things which, in other respects, are actually quite different.

The case of Hinduism is, perhaps, an extreme example. Nonetheless, what is true of Hinduism is to a greater or lesser extent true of all religious traditions. There is simply no such thing as a non-diverse religion (Jainism is the most likely candidate—however, even here there are two distinct branches within the tradition, see Jaini 1979). Our relaxed use of language when we talk of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and so on, might disguise this diversity, but it can easily be brought back to our attention. Take the example of Christianity. There has never, at any time, been a single homogeneous form of Christianity. In the days of Jesus and the first disciples, Christianity did not exist; the first “Christians” were Jews. In the era of the early church, diversity was present—the evidence for this is the range of perspectives found in the earliest Christian writings now contained in the *New Testament*, and in the need for ecumenical church councils to negotiate between the various Christian groups. Diversity has characterized Christianity through the centuries and the beliefs of wave after wave of groups identifying themselves as Christian were declared anathema through various ecclesial councils (see Ehrman 2005). This process of diversification continued, dramatically picking up pace in the modern period after the Reformation and the European Wars of Religion. Now, in the twenty-first century, the number of groups that self-identify as Christian is legion.

So what do we mean when we speak of religious diversity? If we focus on the stunning amount of diversity within what is ostensibly the same religious tradition, our term will have such a broad scope that it will be almost meaningless. Religion traditions are diverse to such an extent that the term “religious diversity” can begin to look like an oxymoron. So let us step back for a moment and repossess our convenient fictions. Let us pretend that there are such things as Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. As I claimed above, when most people use the term “religious diversity” what they have in mind is the apparently straightforward fact that the world contains a number of religious traditions—those mentioned above, as well as others. Why is this thought to be interesting?

The “Problem” of Religious Diversity

Religious diversity is often presented as either a theoretical or a practical challenge, or sometimes as both. On the practical side, diversity raises the problem of how people embracing very different core religious or ethical convictions can live harmoniously in the same society (see the chapter on Civil Society in this volume). This practical problem led to the Wars of Religion in Europe, and it was resolved, insofar as it has been, by the adoption of various forms of liberal democracy which are premised upon the idea that religious convictions can be bracketed out of matters of public concern. The theoretical problem raised by religious diversity is, perhaps, less tractable. But before

unpacking it later in this chapter, it is worth pausing to consider for whom religious diversity might raise a theoretical problem.

The answer to this question is not as obvious as one might expect. For, on the face of it, one might assume that religious diversity has positive value. Diversity, in and of itself, is surely not a problem. In fact, we have become accustomed to putting a high value on it in certain domains: biodiversity, for example, is widely regarded as a great good (as, more trivially, is a diverse menu at one's local restaurant). It is hard to deny that the diverse religions of the world are a seemingly inexhaustible source of interest and stimulus to curiosity. I return to this later in the chapter, but suffice it to say here that many today regard religious diversity as an enriching feature of the world, something to be celebrated rather than a cause of embarrassment.

Still, one might posit that religious believers themselves would find diversity bothersome. But this turns out to be not always the case, and hence not necessarily the case. There are a number of examples of religious traditions that welcome diversity: Baháism would be one such and Hinduism another.

So for whom is religious diversity a problem and what is the nature of the problem? The short answer is that it is often taken to be a problem for monotheists, that is, for those subscribing to any theism claiming that its God is the only one. The problem is that if one holds that religion X has the correct beliefs about that one God, then it seems to follow that religions Y and Z, which hold beliefs that at least appear to conflict with the beliefs of X, are in the epistemic wrong. Looked at this way, it emerges that religious diversity is most likely to be a problem for adherents of the three sibling Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Here the real problem, insofar as there is one, is that—glossing over the diversity within each tradition, emphasized in the previous section—we have three apparently rival accounts, each purportedly telling us about the nature and intentions of the one and only God. Exacerbating the problem, each of the Abrahamic traditions claims that its account came directly from God himself in a special revelation. As these accounts at least seem to conflict in certain important respects, it would be natural to conclude that at most one of them can be substantially correct. So one theoretical problem raised by religious diversity is how to explain these conflicting beliefs that are lodged within rival religious conceptions, without concluding that if one of the traditions is in possession of true claims about God then the claims of the other traditions must be false. One way of responding to this problem is to advance a theory of religious pluralism which, if successful, will allow one to hold that all the apparently conflicting religious conceptions are right—despite the fact that they seem to be saying different things. We will look at one of the most well-known and influential attempts to provide such a theory below. First, however, there are some even more fundamental issues to address.

Religious Diversity and the Case against Theism

Does religious diversity undermine the case in favor of theism? There are a number of reasons why one might think that it does. Here I consider three arguments and suggest some responses to them.

An Argument for Atheism

One argument can be loosely stated as follows: the fact that people disagree about religious beliefs is evidence that none of these beliefs are true, and we should therefore

conclude that atheism is the view to be preferred. Julian Baggini advances just such an argument when he claims that atheism

has great explanatory power when it comes to the existence of divergent religious beliefs. The best explanation for the fact that different religious people believe different things about God and the universe throughout the world is that religion is a human construct that does not correspond to any metaphysical reality.

(Baggini 2003: 29)

It is significant that Baggini recognizes, along with many theists, that religious diversity requires an explanation. He disagrees with theists, though, in his claim that atheism is the “best explanation” for the diversity of religious beliefs. While this might be a rhetorically striking claim, Baggini does not supply an account of how exactly atheism explains religious diversity. Part of the difficulty with arguments such as Baggini’s is that atheism itself is one of the contending accounts of religious matters—so it cannot play the explanatory role in the argument that it is set up to do.

In fact, another idea is doing the work in Baggini’s argument (an idea which, while it might lead one to embrace atheism, is not itself atheism). The key idea is that *religion is a human construct*. Fleshing out the argument on Baggini’s behalf, the claim might be that religious belief is a product of the imagination. Because we have different imaginative capacities, and because people within different cultures have different raw materials for their imaginations to work upon, the diversity of religious beliefs evident in the world is generated. If this is the correct account of how religious beliefs are formed, it would seem perfectly natural that there is a diversity of them.

But is this reconstructed argument sufficient to persuade us that the purported fact that religion is a human construct is the best explanation for religious diversity? It is hard to see why it would be, unless of course we were already convinced that religion is a human construct and, if that were the case, we would probably already hold that all religious beliefs were false—so diversity would not raise any theoretical problem for us that stood in need of a solution. This is not the place to explore the arguments for and against the claim that religion is a human construct (a claim which comes in many forms, the psychological being particularly prominent—see the chapter on Psychology in this volume), and I merely note that unless we already agree with it, we cannot expect it to help us resolve the theoretical problems raised by religious diversity.

An Argument for Agnosticism

Another way of framing an argument against theism from the diversity of religious beliefs might proceed as follows. Persistent religious disagreement among equally well-informed epistemic peers makes it impossible rationally to endorse the beliefs of any particular religion; therefore, we should not hold any religious beliefs, including belief in God. Here the fact of rational disagreement is taken to entail that we should suspend judgment with respect to all religious beliefs. Notice that, even if this argument is found to be persuasive, the strongest conclusion it could yield would be agnosticism—and agnosticism is a far cry from atheism. However, as I shall now argue, it could be that even agnosticism is too strong a conclusion to draw on the basis of persistent disagreement.

The argument for agnosticism trades on our inability to know with any certainty that our own views are the correct ones, and concludes from this that we should withhold our judgment on the matters concerned. There are at least two reasons why this conclusion is too strong. First, it might be that the choice to believe is a forced choice in the sense that it is impossible not to make it. Blaise Pascal famously thought that whether or not to believe in God was a forced choice—refusing to choose simply amounts to deciding not to believe (we return briefly to Pascal’s argument for why we should believe below). If this is the case then agnosticism is an unsustainable position and, consequently, it might be rational to hold religious belief on pragmatic grounds. Second, as I shall now explain, a further argument would be required to get us from the fact of rational disagreement to the claim that we should suspend judgment.

To see that rational disagreement does not always entail that those disagreeing should withhold assent from the claims they disagree about, consider cases of aesthetic judgment. Two individuals might have conflicting views about the aesthetic merits of a painting yet they might both be able to support their views by providing reasons. In this kind of case we probably would not claim that both parties should suspend their judgment on the painting. I do not use this example in order to compare aesthetic and religious claims, but merely to show that there are cases in which the connection between rational disagreement and suspension of judgment is not a necessary one. (One might object that aesthetic claims are not rational, I disagree but will not defend this claim here.)

Despite the availability of counter examples, it remains a popular view that mutually recognized disagreement among rational peers will lead to suspension of judgment about the claim or claims they disagree on (for a defense of this view in the context of theism, see Feldman 2007). And at first sight this does seem to suggest that, given rational disagreement among the adherents of the world’s religious traditions, we should suspend judgment about all their beliefs to preserve rationality. If this were the case then religious diversity would constitute a very serious obstacle to religious belief because, presuming that at least some adherents of each tradition are rational, it entails that it cannot be rational to hold the beliefs of any tradition.

One response would be to attempt to demonstrate that there is no genuine disagreement among equally well-informed rational peers: the claims of one tradition are demonstrably true and this can be seen by everyone with sufficient intelligence. This exclusivist response does not seem plausible to me and I will not pursue it further. Instead I consider a response which invites us to take a more fine-grained look at the structure of the epistemic disagreement. According to this argument, recently advanced by Joshua Thurow (2012), religious disagreement might actually provide a reason in favor of theism. Thurow argues that in cases of revealed disagreement suspension of belief is warranted—but only with respect to the agent’s basic beliefs (those from which other beliefs are derived). Suspending judgment about certain beliefs can open the way for agreement on what is not under dispute.

Thurow introduces his argument with an example, the “disagreeing detectives case”: Two detectives who are rational epistemic peers agree on a body of evidence *E* which, taken alone, would warrant an inference that *P*. They also agree that adding the further proposition *Q* to *E* would override the inference, leading instead to a conclusion that not-*P*. The two detectives disagree, however, about *Q*. One holds that *Q* and the other that not-*Q*. The result of this disagreement about *Q* is a derivative disagreement about whether or not *P*. Mutual revelation of their respective beliefs leads the two detectives

to suspend judgment on the basic issue of whether or not Q . This suspension of judgment, Thurow argues, leads them to agree that P .

Applying the argument to theism: P would be “theism is true” and not- P would be “theism is false.” Q might then be any number of things. Thurow explores how his argument would work if we took Q to be evil, or the belief that miracles have occurred. The key point is that by isolating what it is that agents actually disagree about and suspending judgment about that (the result of arguments from evil, for instance), the way is cleared for agreeing on P —that theism is true. This argument cannot be fully explored here but, assuming for the sake of the discussion that it is successful, let us consider its possible further application to cases in which we are dealing with different conceptions of the attributes and nature of God rather than the somewhat abstract belief that God either exists (bare theism) or does not.

Consider the case of the “disagreeing theists.” Two theists who are rational epistemic peers agree on a body of evidence N (where N might be the findings of natural theology) which, taken alone, would warrant an inference that G (there is a God). But the two theists disagree on a further piece of evidence A (say, the veracity of a particular source of revelation) which prevents them from agreeing on the attributes and nature of God. In other words, they agree that G (there is a God), but disagree about A (revelation), and disagreement about A causes them to hold different conceptions of God. To preserve rationality, should their disagreement about A require them to suspend judgment on G ?

Let us say that we have three mutually inconsistent conceptions of God’s nature and attributes, each of which is supported by rational individuals who are epistemic peers. If we held that disagreement between epistemic peers entailed suspension of judgment we would be forced to conclude that none of these conceptions could be rationally held; and that would seem to entail that G (that God exists) could not be rationally held. But Thurow’s argument allows us to avoid this conclusion. His analysis suggests that we should look for a more basic disagreement underlying G —after all we have three conceptions of *God’s* nature and attributes and not three conceptions of unrelated entities. We need to get to the bottom of the reasons why each of these conceptions is held in preference to the others (and we presume that there are reasons because this follows from our presumption that the conceptions are held by rational agents). The reasons might derive from, for instance, claims about the validity of different religious scriptures. Once we find the source of the different judgments about the rival conceptions of God, Thurow’s argument would counsel the suspension of judgment with respect to these sources (A in the above example) so that disagreement about them will no longer be a threat to rational belief in G .

Notice that, if it is successful, this argument demonstrates that rational disagreement among theists holding different conceptions of God does not entail that they should suspend judgment on G (that God exists). Given revealed disagreement it can be rational for them to believe G ; and this defuses the argument from religious diversity to agnosticism (at least with respect to those cases in which different theistic conceptions are at issue). Another interesting result of this argument is that it shows how epistemic peers can be regarded as rational even though—after suspending judgment on the issues they cannot agree on—they do not come to agree on one conception of God.

The argument so far has not established that it is rational to believe in any particular conception of God’s nature and attributes. Perhaps a form of Pascalian pragmatic

argument might be deployed here to fill the gap between G (that is, bare theism) and belief in some particular conception of God's nature and attributes. But pragmatic arguments have themselves been thought to be vulnerable to objections on the grounds of religious diversity. I now briefly explain why this has been so.

An Argument Blocking Pascal's Wager

A final argument to be mentioned in this section is Diderot's "Many Gods" objection to Pascal's Wager (see Diderot 1875–77: LIX). In its contemporary form, the "Many Gods" objection is the most sophisticated potential defeater of one of the principal pragmatic arguments for the existence of God in the modern Western tradition (see Jordan 1994). Briefly, in his wager, Pascal argues that we are faced with a choice: to believe in God (and act accordingly) or not to believe in God (Pascal 1963). Pascal argues that the most rational thing to do is to bet that God exists because, if you bet correctly, you stand to gain an infinite good (eternal life), whereas if it turns out that God doesn't exist your bet will not have been costly. Conversely if you bet that God does not exist and are wrong, you stand to lose an infinite good and, even if you turn out to be right, your gains would be quite minimal.

The "Many Gods" objection raises the problem that if there are many gods that one might wager on one has to weigh the pros and cons of believing or refusing to believe in each one. The rational gambler has added risks to consider in the form of possible unknown jealous gods. There might also be rival infinities to weigh against each other—and the rational gambler has no way to proceed under these conditions. I cannot go into the details of these arguments here (see Bartha 2007), I merely note that even if some version of the "Many Gods" objections does succeed (and against this see Bartha 2012) it would only undermine one argument for theism rather than theistic belief as such.

Above we have considered three arguments which, if successful, would demonstrate that religious diversity is a problem for theistic belief because it forecloses the possibility of rational belief in any of the available rival religious conceptions. But, as we have seen, there are reasons to doubt that any of these anti-theistic arguments does succeed. In the following section we turn to a different issue: given the facts about religious diversity and the existence of conflicting religious beliefs, is there a way to avoid the exclusivist position that at most the claims of one religious tradition can be correct? (I will not address here the different question of whether we *should* seek to avoid this conclusion rather than simply embrace religious exclusivism.)

Resolving the Problem of Apparently Conflicting Beliefs

Given the undeniable fact of religious diversity, can we avoid the conclusion that, at most, one of the contending religious conceptions is correct and that all of the others must be false insofar as they disagree with it? Various theories of religious pluralism attempt just this. Although religious pluralism has, so far, enjoyed less popular support than either exclusivism or inclusivism (about which see [Chapter 31](#) of this volume), it is important to those who participate in inter-faith dialog. Theories of religious pluralism increasingly became a focus of intellectual debate in the closing decades of the twentieth century. Perhaps the most famous advocate of this type of theory is the widely respected Christian philosopher of religion John Hick (see Hick 1989; and, for a

sympathetic exposition, see Twiss 2000). In this section I review Hick's form of religious pluralism, which I shall refer to as "transcendental pluralism" (on an alternative form of pluralism, see Harrison 2006b and 2008).

Hickian Transcendental Pluralism

Hick's theory of religious pluralism was motivated in large part by his observation that the majority of human beings do not choose their religion, but are, instead, born into a religious tradition. Spiritual luck (this is my phrase, not Hick's) determines which religious tradition, if any, a person is born into and, Hick claims, "normally, in the world as a whole, the faith that a person accepts is the only faith that has been effectively made available to him or her." He continues:

[I]t is an extraordinary, and to some a disturbing, thought that one's basic religious vision, which has come to seem so obviously right and true, has been largely selected by factors entirely beyond one's control—by the accidents of birth . . . In view of this situation, can one be unquestioningly confident that the religion which one happens to have inherited by birth is indeed normative . . . ? Certainly, it is possible that one particular religious tradition is uniquely normative, and that I happen to have had the good fortune to be born into it. And indeed, psychologically, it is very difficult not to assume precisely this. And yet the possibility must persistently recur to any intelligent person, who has taken note of the broad genetic and environmental relativity of the forms of religious commitment, that to assess the traditions of the world by the measure of one's own tradition may merely be to be behaving, predictably, in accordance with the conditioning of one's upbringing.

(Hick 1991: 455–6)

These observations lead Hick to conclude that it is appropriate to adopt an "hermeneutic of suspicion" with regard to all beliefs that one holds as a result of such factors (also see Hick 1997: 281).

Applying this hermeneutical principle leads Hick to regard all religions as having *prima facie* value in their own right. Each is seen as a viable path to the religious goal and is thought to provide knowledge about the ultimate nature of reality. According to Hick, we would never, in principle, be in a position to identify any one religion as the singularly correct one. Nonetheless, we can affirm that there is an ultimate ground to the religious experiences facilitated by the various religious traditions, although we have no direct access to it.

In his earlier work Hick used the term "God" to refer to the ultimate ground of all genuine religious experience, however he came to realize that this term could not be detached from the descriptive content given to it by particular religious conceptions—moreover, it was problematic when applied to traditions such as Buddhism. Consequently, in his mature theory, he employs the term the Real to refer to the ultimate reality grounding religious experience. Hick explains:

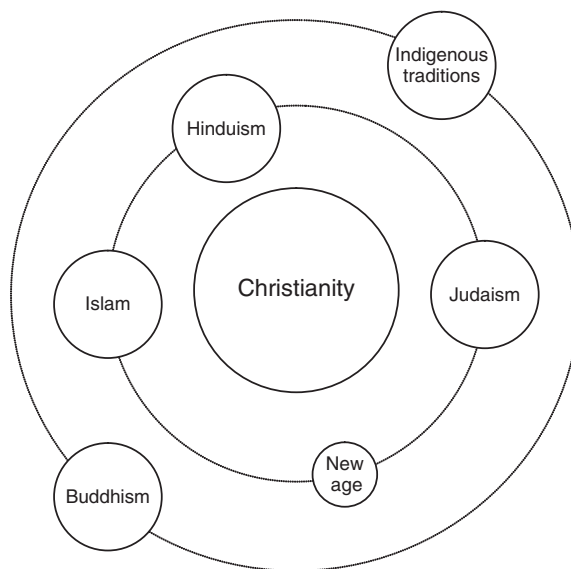
None of the descriptive terms that apply within the realm of human experience can apply literally to the unexperiencable reality that underlies that realm. All that we can say is that we postulate the Real *an sich* as the ultimate ground of

the intentional objects of the different forms of religious thought-and-experience. Nevertheless perhaps we can speak about the Real indirectly and mythologically. For insofar as these gods and absolutes are indeed manifestations of the ultimately Real, an appropriate human response to any one of them will also be an appropriate form of response . . . because the Real is perceived in a range of ways, but it will nevertheless be *an* appropriate response.

(Hick 1989: 350–1)

By distinguishing between the Real-in-itself and the intentional objects of religious thought, Hick advances a hypothesis which—if it succeeds—is capable of explaining both how the various world religions could all be equally valuable and how they could all make justifiable truth-claims (that is, their claims might be true with respect to a specific religious conception).

Hick's pluralist hypothesis, in a nutshell, is that the various world faiths are embodiments of "different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real from within the major variant ways of being human; and that within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness is taking place" (Hick 1989: 240). The great advantage of this theory is that it does not take just one tradition as the starting point of theorizing about religions, but rather adopts a global perspective regarding the relationship between the world faiths. This has been seen as constituting a paradigm shift in the way that people understand religious traditions. As such it has been compared to the shift from a Ptolemaic to a Copernican paradigm in which Christianity is no longer at the center of the universe of faiths (see Hick 1973: 120–32; Hick 1980). Just as on the Copernican astronomical model the sun is the center of the universe (rather than the earth, as on the Ptolemaic model), the Real *an sich* rather than any particular religion's conception of ultimate reality is at the center of Hickean theorizing about religion. (See [Figures 36.1](#)



[Figure 36.1](#) The Ptolemaic paradigm

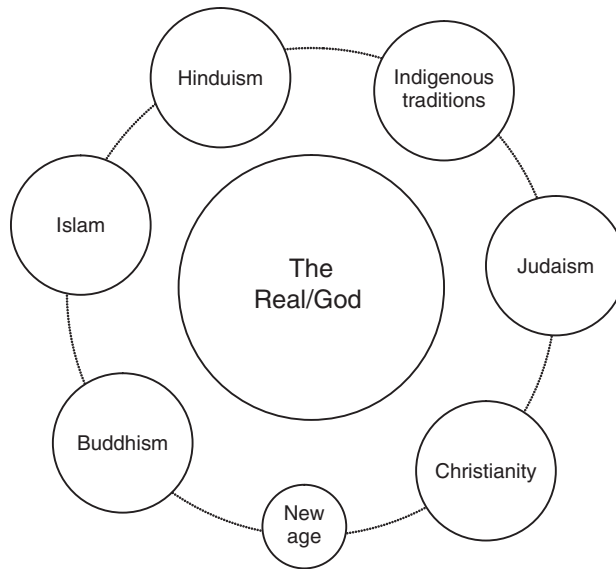


Figure 36.2 The Copernican paradigm

and 36.2 which use a randomly selected and arbitrarily positioned group of religious traditions to illustrate the Ptolemaic and Copernican paradigms within the theory of religions.)

Hick has argued that we can never be in a position to find out with certainty whether any particular religious conception gives a substantially more accurate account of the Real than any other. He counsels that we should assume that they are all equally right (represented in Figure 36.2 by religious traditions all orbiting at an equal distance from the Real). The upshot of this, according to Hick, is that we can confidently embrace our own tradition without worrying too much if its claims seem to contradict those of another religion—the conflict might turn out to be more apparent than real because the claims are probably about different religious phenomena and so cannot be in genuine conflict.

As attractive as Hick's theory has appeared to many, and despite the undeniable influence it has enjoyed over the past several decades, it does not come without cost. Critics have not been slow to point out the many conceptual difficulties the theory faces. Many of these arise from Hick's postulation of the Real both as the source and ultimate ground of religious experience and as an entity that does not possess any properties *an sich*. Hick is forced to accept the latter claim, for if he concedes that the Real has properties, then he will also have to concede that some religious conceptions might give a more accurate account of those properties than others—and this latter concession will spell the end of Hickein transcendental pluralism. (For a discussion which focuses on these difficulties see Yandell 1999: 67–79; and, for a brief review of more general criticisms, see Harrison 2006b: 295–8.)

Aside from worries about the Real, Hick's critics have homed in on his analysis of the way in which religious claims might be true. This perhaps puts on the table the real price of Hickein pluralism. Hick suggests that we revise our conception of religious truth, abandoning the notion of literal truth in favor of what he terms "mythological truth" (Hick 1989: 348). In a move that echoes William James' pragmatic theory of

truth, Hick rejects the view that religious propositions are literally true or false and, instead, refers to “mythological” or “practical” truthfulness (Hick 1989: 248). Religious language, according to Hick, is “true” insofar as it enables people to relate to the Real in a way that furthers the religious quest for salvation/liberation/fulfillment. Asserting that religious worldviews are primarily expressed in myths, he claims that religious myths are “true” insofar as they succeed in evoking “in us attitudes and modes of behaviour which are appropriate to our situation in relation to the Real” (Hick 1989: 248).

Hick is well aware that the view he has proposed is not a description of the way that the majority of religious believers think about the truth of the claims they endorse. But he does hold that, over time the view of the majority is likely to come closer to his proposal (Hick 1989: 377). Nonetheless, he does not believe that the result would be that the various religions merge to form a single global tradition (see the brief discussion of this in Hick 1995: 123–4). Rejecting the view, advanced by some of his critics, that religious syncretism would be the inevitable outcome of the widespread adoption of religious pluralism, Hick projects a different future:

What we are picturing here as a future possibility is not a single world religion, but a situation in which the different traditions no longer see themselves and each other as rival ideological communities. A single world religion is, I would think, never likely, and not a consummation to be desired. For so long as there is a variety of human types there will be a variety of kinds of worship and a variety of theological emphases and approaches. . . . But it is not necessary, and it may in a more ecumenical age not be felt to be necessary, to assume that if God is being truly worshipped by Christians he cannot also be truly worshipped by Jews and Muslims and Sikhs and by theistic Hindus and Amida Buddhists; or even that if the Ultimate Divine Reality is being validly experienced within the theistic streams of religious life as a personal presence, that Reality may not also be validly experienced within other streams of religious life as the infinite Being-Consciousness-Bliss (*Satchitananda*) of some forms of Hinduism, or as the ineffable cosmic Buddha-nature (the *Dharmakaya*) of some forms of Buddhism.

(Hick 1980: 58)

What is attractive about this vision of the future is that the worth and integrity of the various religious traditions are upheld and what is distinctive about each of them is preserved (see Hick 1995: 134–9). The theory of religious pluralism allows religious diversity to exist while releasing the pressure to reduce religions to a single common denominator (the exclusively true core). If successful, transcendental pluralism enables adherents of different faiths to respect each other’s views while remaining committed practitioners of their own traditions.

To sum up: according to Hick, the conclusion we should draw from the fact of religious diversity is that for all we know any of the major religious traditions of the world is as good as any other. So we should just choose the one to which we are acculturated, or the one that suits our temperament, and let others do the same.

The Value of Religious Diversity

Earlier we reviewed an argument to the effect that disagreement among equally well-informed epistemic peers aids the case for theism rather than undermines it, as some,

such as Julian Baggini, had supposed. Might there be further considerations suggesting that religious diversity is a valuable feature of the religious landscape? One such consideration may be that if some version of Abrahamic monotheism is correct, it would be difficult to avoid the conclusion that it is God's will that there be religious diversity (otherwise in his omnipotence and benevolence he surely would have prevented it).

But perhaps we can take the argument even further by asking what goods religious diversity might facilitate. Now one might be tempted to suggest that religious differences give rise to certain moral goods as they encourage people to develop virtues such as tolerance and respect. However, that would be to invite the response that they also give rise to certain moral evils such as hatred and, perhaps, a proclivity to violence. I suggest, then, that a more promising line of inquiry lies in exploring the analogy, briefly mentioned above, between religious diversity and biodiversity.

Aside from obvious aesthetic considerations, one of the main reasons why people value biodiversity is because—roughly speaking—a diverse biological community is more balanced, healthier, and more resilient to internal and external threats than a homogenous community (see Wilson 1988). A plant or animal species is at its most vulnerable when it no longer supports any genetic or behavioral diversity (the plight of the world's banana supply has attracted popular attention to this phenomenon). Diversity in species and in communities allows for adaptation to new conditions and this is a key contributing factor to whether or not any individuals of that species or community survive into the next generation and beyond. Remembering that this is only an analogy, let us now apply these ideas to the religious domain.

Is a diverse religious community more balanced, healthier, and more resilient to internal and external threats? I cannot attempt to prove this here but I venture to suggest an affirmative answer. Moreover, there are two levels on which this might be the case. First, it might be the case at the level of the global religious community comprised of the adherents of the various religions of the world. Second, it might also be the case at the level of individual religious families—such as Christianity, with its luxuriant diversity of forms, and Judaism, which harbors its own rich diversity of traditions, and even Islam whose monolithic image is just as fictional as that of any other religious tradition. Each of these religious families contains, embedded within its sacred texts and liturgical traditions, a diversity of conceptions of God. Different times and places give rise to different needs on the part of religious adherents and these can influence which conceptions of God are brought to the fore (God as Father/Mother/Friend/Teacher/Lover, to skim the surface of possible examples). At this level it seems advantageous to have a reservoir of diverse religious conceptions at the disposal of the faithful. If just one conception of God prevailed, then faith in God might lack resilience if times changed to the extent that this conception was no longer viable. If this is the case, diversity might well be the key to a religion's survival.

Conclusion: Theism and Religious Diversity in the Twenty-first Century

Religious diversity is here to stay. We can conjecture that with an expanding global population, especially in the Indian subcontinent, the practical problems raised by such diversity are likely to be exacerbated in the future. In virtually all parts of the world, as resources become scarcer, the struggle of people adhering to different religious and cultural traditions to live harmoniously side by side is likely to become increasingly

more intense. Given this situation it is of vital importance that we learn to think clearly about the theoretical and practical issues raised by religious diversity. Education about such issues will be of paramount importance in the years ahead. If we can learn to see religious diversity as an opportunity rather than as a problem to be solved we can help to prepare the ground for a more secure and interesting future.

Related Topics

Chapter 5: Islam; Chapter 13: Evidence; Chapter 19: Philosophical Methodology; Chapter 20: Philosophy of Religion; Chapter 27: Religious Language; Chapter 29: Religious Experience; Chapter 31: Civil Society; Chapter 37: Globalization; Chapter 41: Environment; Chapter 43: Aesthetics

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- Hick, J. (1989) *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, London: Macmillan. John Hick's most comprehensive presentation of his theory of religious pluralism.
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- Quinn, P. L. and K. Meeker (eds), (2000) *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. A useful anthology concentrating on the philosophical—and especially the epistemological—problems raised by religious diversity.
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GLOBALIZATION

H. E. Baber

Introduction: Globalization and Religious Diversity

All of the world's major religions have been formed by globalization—a process by which regional economies, societies, and cultures become increasingly integrated through communication, transportation, and trade, and through which local cults are submerged or subsumed by world religions—each claiming to be the whole faith for the whole world. Samuel Huntington, famously, argued that the most important conflicts of the future will occur along cultural fault lines that track religious differences. He writes:

CIVILIZATION IDENTITY will be increasingly important in the future, and the world will be shaped in large measure by the interactions among seven or eight major civilizations. These include Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American and, possibly African civilization. The most important conflicts of the future will occur along the cultural fault lines separating these civilizations from one another. Why will this be the case? First, differences among civilizations are not only real; they are basic. Civilizations are differentiated from each other by history, language, culture, tradition, and, most important, religion.

(Huntington 1993: 25)

Globalization sets the stage for increased contact amongst members of diverse religious traditions—and, if Huntington is correct, for a clash of civilizations defined in large part by religious differences. People of good will hope that by making the case that religious differences are superficial or illusory they can put an end to religious bigotry and oppression, holy wars, inquisitions, and crusades. I argue, however, that our legitimate interest in promoting religious tolerance does not require us to ignore or repudiate genuine religious differences. In the sections that follow, I discuss the prospects for peaceful religious coexistence in a world transformed by globalization.

Why is Religious Disagreement a Problem?

Every intellectual enterprise and academic discipline is rife with disagreement. In mathematics and the empirical sciences we expect that eventually disagreements will be resolved: scientific hypotheses will be confirmed or disconfirmed by observation and experiment; mathematical conjectures will be proved or shown to be false. We recognize, however, that even where solutions are forthcoming, they will likely pose new

problems and further controversies. In philosophy and other humanities disciplines, we rarely even expect conclusive solutions; like history, all of these academic enterprises involve “argument without end.”

We do not worry about these disagreements—indeed we thrive on them: they promote scientific progress and keep philosophers in business. But many view religious disagreement differently—as problematic, threatening, and in any case undesirable. Why is theology different?

One reason is perhaps because adherents of most religious traditions do not believe that religion progresses—or, indeed, that it should. Christians, for one, have traditionally held that the true faith was revealed to the primitive Church and that disagreement only arose later, when the original message was corrupted. Most religious believers do not see theological disagreement as a spur to religious progress; they hope for a time when arguments will cease and theological discussion will come to an end. Their response to disagreement has been, if conservative, to cast out heretics in the interests of achieving doctrinal purity or, if liberal, to fudge on differences and insist that they are either illusory or pertain to things indifferent.

Perhaps more importantly, most religious believers and religious studies scholars assume that religious belief is *important* for the development of our character, the shaping of our lives and the ordering of human societies and that, if true, should be held with the highest possible degree of conviction. Theology is, therefore, different from other academic disciplines.

First, most religious believers and religious studies scholars regard religion as important because they hold that religion by its nature is *salvific*—either in its effect on individual believers, or on the social order, or both. Arriving at truths in mathematics or the empirical sciences, in philosophy or in other academic disciplines, might be a good thing but we can live without it. When it comes to religion, however, most serious religious believers hold that getting it right doctrinally and behaving according to the rules of conduct embodied in their religious tradition is necessary for the well-being of individuals and for the social good. Even if they do not expect God to punish heretics or visit famine, plague, and military defeat on communities that harbor them, most assume that religious belief changes lives for the better, answers to some deep-seated human need or, at the very least, keeps people from running amok.

Second, serious adherents of world religions believe that their religions—or, minimally, religion as such—are of universal interest. Many assume that even if their preferred great world religions are not for everyone, there is nevertheless a core of generic doctrine that everyone should believe or, at the very least, a need in everyone for “spirituality” of some sort—a God-hole that wants to be filled, or a list of Big Questions crying for answers. Religion, both religious believers and theologians assume, is not just a hobby, or a taste that some people have but some do not.

Finally, it is generally assumed that religious believers should hold religious beliefs with the highest degree of conviction. Unlike other metaphysical theses which no reasonable person would bet on, religious doctrines are supposed to be at once hard to swallow and deserving of intense, unwavering commitment. While doubt might be understandable and forgivable, it is certainly not desirable; commitment is a virtue and the bigger the leap of faith the more meritorious.

Globalization undermines all of these assumptions. Plato accepted the existence of the gods as a matter of common opinion. We recognize that there is no common opinion about the nature or existence of God or gods because we know that, globally, there

is widespread theological disagreement. Where theological matters are not backed by common opinion and where there is no consensus, either about theological details or even the most fundamental claims about the existence and nature of God, it is difficult and, indeed, unreasonable to maintain religious belief with any serious degree of conviction.

Globalization also puts pressure on the assumption that religion is of universal interest. In addition to revealing the diversity of religious beliefs and practices, it exposes religious believers to secularists, who do not hold religious beliefs of any kind or participate in any religious practices but who seem none the worse for it. Religious believers are forced to confront the fact that most of the happy, morally decent, law-abiding citizens of affluent countries are not religious believers and, for the most part, have no interest in the “big questions” that are supposed to motivate the religious quest.

This undermines the claim that religion is salvific even in the most latitudinarian sense. A great many people seem to do perfectly well without it and the world’s most secular societies, in Western Europe and Japan, are doing very well indeed. Globally, religion flourishes where people are badly off, where religious groups promise the benefits that citizens of affluent countries get from modern medicine and other technologies, and where churches are the only institutions that stand with ordinary people against corrupt governments and tin-pot dictators. With exceptions to prove the rule, when people’s material needs are satisfied by secular means most lose interest in religion.

It is therefore no longer plausible to hold that religious belief and participation in religious ceremonies are important for the welfare of individuals or the social order, that religion is of universal interest or that religious beliefs can, or should, be maintained with a high degree of conviction.

There are two responses available to religious believers, who have traditionally held that religion is important, of universal interest and deserving of the highest degree of conviction. We can revise our understanding of the *content* of religion in order to identify it with a body of practices or beliefs that *are* important to the well-being of individuals and the social order, that *are* of universal interest and that *can* (and should) be maintained with a high degree of conviction. Or we can keep the content fixed but reject traditional claims about the *significance* of religion, granting that it is a minority taste, which cannot be expected to engage most people, that it has little practical import for individuals or their communities, and that no reasonable person should hold religious beliefs with any high degree of conviction.

Friends of religion have traditionally taken the first course, attempting to persuade an increasingly skeptical public that religion was *really* ethics or *really* therapy or *really* a social improvement program—*really* something that was salvific and of universal interest—and, in any case, that all religions were *really* one. “At least since the first petals of the counterculture bloomed,” writes Stephen Prothero, “[i]t has been fashionable to affirm that all religions are beautiful and all are true.” Arguing that “God is not one,” Prothero notes the peculiarity of the contrary claim:

No one argues that different economic systems or political regimes are one and the same . . . Yet scholars continue to claim that religious rivals such as Hinduism and Islam, Judaism and Christianity are, by some miracle of the imagination, essentially the same, and this view resounds in the echo chamber of popular culture.

(Prothero 2010: 1)

This is indeed puzzling until we recognize that religious studies scholars are attempting to detoxify religion—to eliminate its potential for promoting conflict—by making it out to be something that most religious believers would scarcely recognize. I suggest that we take the second more radical course and reject traditional claims about the significance of religion instead. That is the tack I shall take, providing first a descriptive account of religion and then arguing that even those world religions that are theistic are not all concerned with the same supernatural beings or states of affairs.

God is not one. But that should not be a cause for concern. Since, I suggest, religious differences are not the fundamental cause of violence or geo-political conflict. Crusades, jihads and inquisitions are spurred by economic interests, tribal loyalties, and secular politics. Religion is epiphenomenal. Crusaders pushed east to capture territory, whether it was under the control of Muslims or Orthodox Christians. Muslims pushed west to capture territory and we might conjecture that, as Graham Fuller argues, a world without Islam would not be much different from the one we currently occupy (Fuller 2010). Arabs would have swept out of the Arabian Peninsula and Turkic tribes would have pushed into Anatolia regardless of their religious convictions or affiliations.

If this is correct then well-meaning attempts to establish that all religions are really one because ultimately they all worship the same entity are pointless: religious diversity does not motivate violence, oppression, or imperialism and eliminating it, or making the case that it is illusory, will not make the world a safer, happier or more peaceful place. If that is so we can afford to address the question of what religion is honestly without feeling obliged to show that all religions are one in the interests of promoting tolerance.

Religion

Any descriptive account of what religion is should include criteria which all clear cases of religions satisfy and which all clear cases of non-religion fail. It should also explain why borderline cases are borderline.

Hoping to show that religion was credible, of universal interest, and vital to well-being, religious studies scholars and other writers sympathetic to religion have produced a variety of definitions of the phenomenon, none of which would be recognized by most religious believers, that do not provide such criteria:

Alfred North Whitehead: “what the individual does with his own solitariness.”
(Cited in Hexham 1993: 186–7)

George Hegel: “the knowledge possessed by the finite mind of its nature as absolute mind.”
(Cited in *ibid.*)

Paul Tillich: “the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern.”
(Cited in Webb 2010: 42)

Robert Bellah: “a set of symbolic forms and acts that relate man to the ultimate conditions of his existence.”
(Bellah 1991: 21)

Keith Yandell's account is perhaps more representative of views in current philosophy of religion:

A religion proposes a diagnosis (an account of what it takes the basic problem facing human beings to be) and a cure (a way of permanently and desirably solving that problem): one basic problem shared by every human person and one fundamental solution that . . . is essentially the same across the board. . . . Different religions offer differing diagnoses and cures. Given that criterion, there are a good many religions. The diagnosis that a particular religion articulates asserts that every human person has a basic non-physical illness so deep that, unless it is cured, one's potential is unfulfilled and one's nature cripplingly flawed. Then a cure is proffered.

(Yandell 1999: 23)

This account assumes that there is a problem endemic to the human condition which is so "deep" that if we fail to address it our lives will be significantly poorer and our nature will be seriously flawed. It is, however, questionable whether many humans are concerned about such matters, or should be. As Bonhoeffer notes, "[t]he ordinary man who spends his everyday life at work, and with his family, and of course with all kinds of hobbies and other interests too" pays no attention to "the existentialist philosophers and the psychotherapists, who demonstrate to secure, contented, happy mankind that it is really unhappy and desperate, and merely unwilling to realize that it is in severe straits it knows nothing at all about, from which only they can rescue it" (Bonhoeffer and Bethge 1960: 146–7).

Moreover, like the other highfalutin revisionary definitions of religion, Yandell's fits ill with ordinary religious believers' understanding of what religion is.

First, Yandell's definition does not provide a necessary condition for religion as the folk understand it. It seems likely that most individuals whom the folk would recognize as religious believers do not think they suffer from any deep non-physical illness or look to religion for a cure. We think of Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims, who believe in the existence of the supernatural beings and states of affairs posited by Christian theology and who clearly count as religious believers by folk standards. For most, including ecclesiastical employees such as the Sumner, the Pardoner, and the Prioress, religion makes little difference in their lives. Like Bonhoeffer's "ordinary man" they are not troubled by existential angst. In secular cultures, religious believers are self-selected and so might take their commitments more seriously, but at most times, in most places, religious belief and practice have been part of the world-taken-for-granted as they were for Chaucer's religious tourists. For most religious people, supernatural beings are just more authorities to be petitioned, wheedled, and placated, and religious ceremonies are merely part of the business of life.

Second, Yandell's account does not provide a sufficient condition for religion as the folk understand it: it fails to capture the common view that religion is essentially supernaturalistic—involving, if not belief in a God or gods, at the very least beliefs concerning minor supernatural entities or supernatural states of affairs, such as post-mortem survival or the transmigration of souls. There are numerous self-help programs and therapies that promise to improve one's character and release untapped human potential, which we would not call "religions" without benefit of scare quotes because they do not involve any supernaturalistic elements.

There are also “philosophies of life” and bodies of wisdom literature that claim to diagnose and cure deep non-physical illnesses endemic to the human condition by providing worldviews, values, and moral visions that shape their adherents’ lives. Given the folk understanding of religion, however, such “philosophies” are neither religions nor essential features of religions. Some religions, notably Christianity and Buddhism, have developed around deified teachers of wisdom, and so include “wisdom” and “values” components. But not all teachers of wisdom have been deified. Neither Socrates nor later Hellenistic philosophers who dispensed advice about how to live became the focus of cultic practice. In the ordinary way of thinking, neither Socrates’ reflections on virtue, nor Stoicism, nor any of the other “philosophies” that flourished during the period, however elevated and edifying, count as religious insofar as they have no cultic expression. On the other hand, it seems likely that the folk would understand cultic practices that have no ethical or “philosophical” import, for example the activities of voodooists and shamans, as religious.

On the account suggested here, therefore, supernaturalistic beliefs and ritual are essential to religion as ordinarily understood—ethics, values, “wisdom,” conjectures about the “meaning of life,” reflections on the human condition, and accounts of our place in the universe are not. Moreover, even when it comes to the religions of deified teachers of wisdom, which institutionalize moral codes and accounts of our place in the grand scheme of things as official doctrine, many adherents—perhaps even most—have no serious interest in either the ethics or the “philosophy” associated with their religious commitments. Most of us, I suspect, would nevertheless count them as *religious* insofar as they hold beliefs about the supernatural and participate in cultic activities, particularly those organized by the religious institutions with which they are affiliated.

In general, current academic definitions of religion seem to be covertly normative. On the one hand they ask too much. So, for example, Charles Taliaferro requires that the teachings and practices a religion embodies be about an “ultimate” reality and guide adherents into a “saving, illuminating, and emancipatory relationship with that reality” (Taliaferro 2010: chapter 1). Presumably religions that are merely concerned with wheedling and placating crudely anthropomorphic minor spirits in the interests of obtaining material benefits are primitive or defective—if, indeed, they are religions at all. Academic accounts valorize “the great world religions,” which Taliaferro notes “have advanced philosophies of the sacred” (*ibid.*) as models of what religion *should* be.

On the other hand these accounts ask too little. They do not require either supernaturalism or ritual. And this seems at odds with the way the folk understand what it is to be religious—namely, to believe that there is some being or state of affairs beyond the material universe and to participate in what are commonly understood as religious rituals.

If this is correct then I suggest we understand religion as:

1. A body of doctrine concerning supernatural beings, phenomena or states of affairs;
2. associated with ceremonies, typically involving cult objects and other special equipment;
3. embodied in an institution.

Any social phenomenon that meets all three conditions is a clear case of a religion. If you see a group of people engaging in ceremonial acts under the auspices of an institution

that maintains cultic centers, supplies equipment, and organizes ritual events, and if, when asked, they say that they are participating in this ceremony to honor or propitiate supernatural beings—gods, ancestors or spirits of some sort—that will likely convince you that what you are observing is religion.

All clear cases of religion meet all three conditions; no religion fails all three; and social practices that satisfy two of the conditions are borderline cases of religion. State Marxism and other ideological/patriotic cults are borderline cases of religion to the extent that they satisfy (2) and (3). They are not central cases because their constitutive doctrines do not concern supernatural beings, phenomena or states of affairs. Free-lance New Ageism is a borderline case of religion because, although it satisfies (1) and (2), insofar as it involves beliefs about the supernatural, ceremonies, and cult objects, it is not institutionalized. “Philosophies” concerning supernatural beings, phenomena or states of affairs that are not associated with rituals or institutionally embodied are clearly not religions.

On this account, a religion at its core consists of ritual practices, that is, actions that are neither arbitrarily chosen by their performers nor dictated purely by logic, chance, necessity or pragmatic purposes naturalistically understood. Myths and theologies make sense of the rituals; religious institutions provide infrastructure and organize them.

Moral codes and “philosophies” are not essential to religion. Some religions, including shamanism and Shinto, do perfectly well without them. It is not even clear that those religious traditions that are associated with moral codes share common ethical principles in any interesting sense. The Golden Rule, which according to popular opinion, all religions teach, is not peculiarly religious. Mill held that it expressed “the complete spirit of the ethics of utility” (Mill 1987: 228). Virtually everyone, including individuals who have no use for religion, pays lip service to it. But, short of the Golden Rule, even those religions that include moral codes disagree. If we seek to find the commonality of all religious traditions in some shared, distinctively religious system of “values” then we shall have to fudge on the differences, and either regard Shinto and shamanism as defective religions at best or exclude them altogether.

The interesting similarities and differences amongst religions are those that concern *essential* features: the nature of supernatural beliefs and the character of the individual and corporate rituals they embody. Ascertaining whether different religious traditions embody the same essential supernaturalistic beliefs is, however, problematic for a variety of reasons, among them the difficulty of determining the conditions under which the names and other referring expressions they use purport to refer to the same supernatural beings. There is, however, no reason to assume a priori that expressions within different theological traditions that purport to refer to supernatural beings all refer to the same Being and there is, indeed, reason to believe that some purport to refer to the same Being while others do not.

The Problem of Reference

Father of all! in every age,
In every clime adored,
By saint, by savage, and by sage,
Jehovah, Jove, or Lord!

(Alexander Pope in Rogers 1955)

Do “Jehovah,” “Jove,” and “Lord” and all the rest in fact refer to the same (possibly fictitious) individual? Did “Demeter,” “Cybele,” “Gaia” and “Isis” refer to the same mother goddess? Were the cultic activities devoted to Zeus or Artemis, under different descriptions, in different places, directed to the same god or goddess?

Peter Byrne is typical of religious pluralists in arguing that “all major religious traditions refer to a common sacred, transcendent reality” (Byrne 1995: 31). He explains:

There can be but one unique referent for the religions if there is any referent at all. If the names of the sacred in a religion do not name the transcendent ultimate postulated by so much philosophy, East and West, we may be unable to assign them any reference whatsoever. Hence we have a powerful motive, resting upon the demands of intellectual economy and charity, to assign all traditions the same referent.

(Ibid.: 52)

On this account, the “major religious traditions” stand or fall together. Byrne’s take on religion is, however, questionable.

First, Byrne selects a special class of religions, the “major religious traditions,” to which the thesis is applicable without providing any clear, non-question-begging criteria for the selection. Are these traditions on the shortlist because they have more adherents than minor, local or tribal religious traditions, because they represent religion in its paradigmatic or most evolved form, or because they support the pluralist thesis?

Second, Byrne dismisses “confessional” interpretations of religion, the doctrinal peculiarities of distinct religious traditions. “The differences between traditions,” he claims, “do not matter when it comes to considering whether such traditions make reference to a common sacred reality and offer means of orienting human beings lives toward that reality” (ibid.: 26). But unless we can make the case that, however ignorant or mistaken ordinary religious believers have been, the object of their devotion is *really* the “transcendent ground of reality,” this move just adds another god to the pantheon: Jews worship Yahweh, Christians the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; Muslims pray to Allah; and Hindus, depending on their particular sect, venerate Vishnu, Shiva or the Goddess through their various avatars. But the enlightened of every religious tradition, along with individuals who are spiritual but not religious, direct their attention to yet another being, namely, “the transcendent ultimate.”

Moreover, we might question whether talk about a “transcendent ground of reality” is even intelligible. In what does “grounding” consist? And how are we to understand “reality” in this context? Does it include its “ground”? If so, then that ground is not transcendent. If not, then it is not real. Greek myths, even if literally false, are intelligible and so is orthodox Christian theology—whether true or false. But this revisionary theology, intended to appeal to cultured despisers who take it for granted that Greek mythology and orthodox Christian theology are equally implausible, evacuates theology of all intelligible content.

Restricting consideration to “major religious traditions,” each stripped of its confessional peculiarities and understood as an account of a “transcendent ground of reality which is the sum and source of value,” (ibid.: 33) assuming this is intelligible, the pluralist thesis that all religions refer to the same being, might be plausible. But this elevated, stripped down religion is not to most people’s taste. Even on the most charitable interpretation, most religious believers have never had the slightest interest in a “transcendent

ground of reality.” Most take themselves to be doing business with a powerful, if not omnipotent, incorporeal agent who is the subject of psychological states. Whatever the “ground of reality” is supposed to be, if it cannot be said to be conscious, to know, will, and act, it is not what most religious believers understand as God.

The community of religious studies scholars can, of course, stipulate that “God” is to refer to the “transcendent ground of reality” and, in their capacity as theological experts, recommend that the general public adopt this usage. But that is not to say that the general public, or religious believers in particular, are *really* referring to this being, however mistaken they might be about its character, when they articulate their religious beliefs.

Byrne’s argument for “assigning all traditions the same referent” is in any case obscure, so admittedly the following exegesis is speculative. Byrne’s thought seems to be, first, that since there are no beings that have the characteristics assigned to them by the distinct “confessional” interpretations of different religions, the “names of the sacred” in these religions fail to refer. Second, he seems to assume that if such names fail to refer, identity questions must be unanswerable.

The first claim, if this is indeed what Byrne intends, is simply false. We can succeed in referring even if we are largely ignorant and even grossly mistaken about the character of the referents. We can, indeed, as Donnellan noted long ago, pick out individuals by descriptions that are not true of them (Donnellan 1966). Even if the theology of a religious group is largely mistaken, adherents might still succeed in referring; even if members’ different religious traditions disagree about theological details they might still refer to the same God.

The second claim is more contentious. There is, indeed, a worry about identity statements concerning non-entities, including mere *possibilia*. No entity without identity. Nevertheless, identifying and individuating fictional characters and other non-entities does not seem to be as hopeless a task as Quine imagined. We do it all the time. Superman is certainly identical to Clark Kent—and not to Jimmy Olson. Moreover, even from the outside, as critics, we can meaningfully ask questions about the identities of characters across literary works. Emmaline Lucas, “Lucia,” appears in six of E. F. Benson’s novels. The same character appears in two sequels written over half a century later by Tom Holt.

We can answer questions about the identity of non-entities because the question of how the reference of a term is transmitted from speaker to speaker is distinct from the question of how its reference is fixed. Even where we are talking about non-entities or leave it as an open question whether we are, we can still ask, and answer, questions about whether we mean to talk about the same thing. And even if we suspend judgment about the existence of God or gods, we can still address the question of whether adherents of different religious traditions mean to talk about the same god or not. There is no reason to hold that unless speakers refer to the one “transcendent ground of reality” we cannot reasonably conclude they mean to talk about the same god—or to different gods.

Leaving it an open question whether the god in question exists or not, we can ask: When do religious believers mean to “talk about” the same god? It seems plausible to suggest that they do so when they have inherited their religious terminology from a common source, when they intend to refer to the same god and when descriptions of their respective gods are not too far out of whack. Sometimes godtalk purports to refer to the same deity; sometimes it does not.

It is worth considering an example. Shortly after 9/11 evangelist Franklin Graham informed the American public that: “The god of Islam is not the same God of the

Christian or the Judeo-Christian faith. It is a different god” (see www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week616/cover.html).

Graham was wrong: on any reasonable account of reference “God” and “Allah” purport to refer to the same being. Christian Arabs address God as “Allah.” The name comes down a causal chain from the milieu in which the writers of the Old Testament flourished. The Biblical “Elohim” is a plural form of the Hebrew cognate of “Allah,” which is a contraction of the definite article “*al-*” and “*ilah*” meaning “deity.” So “Allah” has sense, if not reference, and means “the [sole] deity, God” (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allah>). It is not a straightforward proper name, like “Apollo” or “Thor,” and insofar as it has descriptive content it means just what “God” means in English. Moreover, historically, Islam drew from Judaism and Christianity. Like the Book of Mormon, the Koran is a Biblical knock-off and, indeed, initially Christians regarded Islam as a Christian heresy rather than a non-Christian religion. Finally, it is clear that in talking about Allah, Mohammad and his followers intended to refer to the same being whom Jesus called “Father”: Mohammad claimed to be a prophet of the same God as Adam, Abraham, and Jesus.

Muslims and Christians hold different beliefs about the nature of this being, but we can refer to the same individual even if we hold different views about what that individual is like. Granted, at some point our views about what the individual in question is like might diverge so radically that we shall be forced to conclude that we are not referring to the same individual. Still, among Christians, Jews, and Muslims there is substantial theological agreement. Muslims do not, of course, recognize a Trinity of Persons in God, but neither do Jews, whom Christians recognize as fellow believers in the same God in spite of their mistaken ideas about what this God is like. If Jews count as believing in the same God as Christians then so do Muslims: the God of Islam is very clearly the same God as the God of Graham’s “Judeo-Christian faith.”

Whether we can say the same of the deities of Hinduism or other theistic traditions which, unlike Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, did not develop from within the same cultural milieu is another matter—particularly since the theology in which they are embedded is radically different from the theology of the Abrahamic religions. Do Hindu devotees of Vishnu, Shiva or the Goddess believe in the same God as Jews, Christians, and Muslims? Closer to home we can ask whether Jove, or even more interestingly, Sol Invictus, a favorite of monotheistically inclined Greco-Roman pagans, was the same deity as the God of Christians.

We can, however, leave these as open questions noting only that there is no reason to believe that all religions, or even all “major” or “world” religions, really purport to refer to the same individual, much less to a being who is the “transcendent ground of reality.” Some do and some don’t.

Religion is Not the Problem . . . Or the Solution

Now suppose we determine that some religions direct their attention to our preferred god, while others do not. Why should we care? If, on the global stage, religion is epiphenomenal as I have suggested, even if we discover that we do not all worship the same god it will not make any significant difference and so, arguably, there is no reason why we should care.

Most of us Americans, at least, are “lay liberals” who believe that “it doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you live right.” We have no stomach for holy wars or even for proselytizing. “Evangelism and mission outreach,” Luidens, Hoge and Johnson note

in their study of religion among the Baby Boomer generation, “are condoned by lay liberals to the extent that they involve education or service to the less fortunate” but not if they promote proselytization:

“Go teach” and “go heal” are acceptable battle cries. But lay liberals are resistant to “go preach”; evangelism and mission programs are not acceptable if they involve efforts to persuade others that their faiths are inadequate. Many Boomers . . . say that they would be content if their children adopted non-Western religions “as long as they are happy” and as long as they are moral citizens.

(Luidens et al. 1994)

Most of us do not believe that Christianity, or any other religion is “necessary to salvation” and have no interest in promoting theological conformity:

[R]elativism and privatism are embedded in lay liberalism. . . . One’s personal beliefs are only appropriate relative to one’s own life and social context and should not be binding on others. This produces a strongly privatized faith. . . . For lay liberals, therefore, one denomination is almost as good as another—when and if it is needed. . . . While a sizeable majority of the unchurched are lay liberals, this perspective is also widely held among those who are churchd. . . . We estimate that well over half of our Baby Boomers could be classified as lay liberals.

(Ibid.)

Of course that’s *us*. Critics will suggest that elsewhere, particularly within the Islamic world, lay liberals are scarce. Nevertheless there is little support for Europeans’ worry that Muslims aim to take over the West and impose Shari’a. As the rhetoric of Osama bin Laden and his followers suggests, even radical Islamicists are not interested in establishing Eurabia: their aim is to oppose Western neo-colonialism. Like other Third World anti-colonialists who, in the past, adopted Marxism as a protest against Westernization, formerly colonized peoples in the Middle East and elsewhere oppose Westernization—now in the name of Islam. If there is a “clash of civilizations” it is not between cultures defined by their religious affiliations but between affluent cosmopolitans in societies formed by the Enlightenment and members of the traditional societies of the Global South, who have been colonized, exploited and humiliated, many of whom have turned to radical Islam as an expression of their anti-Western sentiments.

Religious disputes merely signal tribal and ethnic clashes, power plays, territorial disputes, and other mundane, political differences, which often enough have played out in the absence of religious disagreement. From the Fourth Crusade to the world wars of the twentieth century, Christians have waged war against fellow Christians. Muslims have made war on fellow Muslims since the Abbasid dynasty overthrew the Umayyad caliphs in the eighth century; currently Sudanese Muslims are conducting a slow-motion genocide on their fellow Muslims in Darfur. Religious agreement is not sufficient for mutual respect and peaceful coexistence, and it is not necessary either. In the US, evangelical Christians happily work alongside Mormons and atheistic libertarians to promote conservative policies.

Globalization has unleashed a variety of political and economic forces that have resulted in violence, warfare, and terrorism. I have suggested, however, that religious differences are not responsible for these evils, and so ecumenical efforts will not fix

them. On the world stage, religion as such is not important. There is no reason, therefore, to look for theological common ground amongst world religions or, with Byrne, to reject distinct “confessional interpretations” in order to make out that there is a common essence to all religious beliefs and practices.

Globalization is not a novelty: Alexander the Great started it. The Hellenistic world was the first experiment in multiculturalism and the Roman Empire expanded and perfected it. The Mediterranean world of the period was a “world full of gods” where innumerable cults and mystery religions were in operation. But Greco-Roman paganism was syncretic, and was, as Ramsey McMullen put it, “a spongy mass of tolerance” (MacMullen 1997: 2).

That should not be surprising since amongst pagans the cults of the various gods were not thought to be either universal or exclusive, and there was some sense that each god should get his due. However, even when it came to Jews and Christians, the theologically indigestible monotheists in that mix of Hellenistic mystery religions, Oriental imports, and decaying cults of the city gods, toleration became the norm. And for their part, some Christians were willing to hedge their theological bets. Most notable amongst them was Constantine who, together with his colleague Licinius, issued the Edict of Milan in 313 establishing a policy of religious toleration:

When I, Constantine Augustus, as well as I Licinius Augustus fortunately met near Mediolanum (Milan), and were considering everything that pertained to the public welfare and security, we thought, among other things which we saw would be for the good of many, those regulations pertaining to the reverence of the Divinity ought certainly to be made first, so that we might grant to the Christians and others full authority to observe that religion which each preferred; whence any Divinity whatsoever in the seat of the heavens may be propitious and kindly disposed to us and all who are placed under our rule.

(Edict of Milan, available at www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/edict-milan.html; emphasis added)

Though representing only approximately ten percent of the Empire by the early fourth century, Christians were ubiquitous. As Tertullian, writing almost a century earlier noted: Christians were friends and neighbors; they were in the professions, in the military, and in every trade. And they were also relatives: Christians were married—and buried—with non-Christians. Diocletian’s Great Persecution was an expensive failure because it had little popular support. By the time of Diocletian, Christians had become everyone’s friends, neighbors, and relatives—and no one wanted to persecute members of his own family or tribe. Constantine, whatever his personal views on the matter, confirmed popular opinion.

Like the Romans of the period, we Americans are also at once very religious and very tolerant. Robert Putnam suggests that this is a consequence of the Aunt Susan Principle. Aunt Susan is a pagan, a lesbian, a Mormon, an atheist—something that we are not—but we know that she is a good person and will surely go to heaven, if there is a heaven (Putnam and Campbell 2010). So we reject the idea that outside of our church, whichever church it is, there is no salvation. We are as syncretic as those religiously promiscuous Romans, and might as well enjoy it.

Religion is not important, I have argued, either as a universal prerequisite for the good life or as a driver of world affairs. But the best things in life are not important or universally appealing—including literature, music, art, and everything else that makes civilized life

worthwhile. We can agree to disagree on theological matters precisely because religion is not important. And because it is not important, instead of ignoring or eliminating differences between religious traditions we can recognize, affirm, and enjoy them.

Related Topics

Chapter 31: Civil Society; Chapter 32: Human Rights; Chapter 33: War; Chapter 36: Religious Diversity; Chapter 44: Literature

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Recommended Reading

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- Banchoff, T. (ed.), (2008) *Religious Pluralism, Globalization, and World Politics*, New York: Oxford University Press. A useful collection of recent essays on religious pluralism in a global context with a comprehensive overview in the editor's introduction.
- Hick, J. (1989) *An Interpretation of Religion*, Basingstoke: Macmillan. The classic work on religious pluralism by its most prominent exponent.
- Huntington, S. P. (1998) *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, New York: Simon & Schuster. Huntington argues that differences amongst cultures based on religious traditions has led to a clash of civilizations which carries with it the threat of global violence.
- Putnam, R. D. and D. E. Campbell (2010) *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, New York: Simon & Schuster. An accessible and very readable discussion of religious diversity in contemporary America based on two of the most comprehensive surveys ever conducted on religion and public life in the US.
- Singer, P. (2002) *One World: The Ethics of Globalization*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. One of today's most prominent ethicists and most controversial public intellectuals discusses the most significant moral and political issues arising from globalization broadly construed.

38

EDUCATION

David Carr

Theism and Religious Education

At first glance, the title of this first section of the chapter might appear little more than another label for religious education. On closer scrutiny, however, the sense of “theism and education” can be broader or narrower, stronger or weaker, than that of religious education. Indeed, on one interpretation—which we mention now to get it out of the way—the topic of theism and education might seem narrower than that of religious education, since not all religions (such as Buddhism or Jainism) have been theistic. That said, one might also make too much of this point. If one conceives of religion as essentially concerned with the nature or fate of the soul or spirit (Carr 2008), then God or the gods could be considered as (perhaps “essential”) forms of such soul or spirit and most religions do envisage ultimate human or other destiny in terms of the prosperity or salvation of spiritual lives or agencies so conceived.

There are also deeper and shallower senses of religious education. In a shallower sense, religious education has too often meant socialization, induction or indoctrination of the young into the beliefs of a particular community of faith. In a deeper sense, however, it might signify serious philosophical exploration of the very *meaning* of deity, religious faith and/or religious practice—which might also, in the limiting case, entail or risk the possible conclusion that they cannot be given much, if any, coherent or intelligible sense. At all events, it is in something like this stronger sense of religious education that the topic of theism and education will be approached in this chapter. The present chapter will, therefore, be concerned with the question(s) of whether concepts of God (or gods) can be given senses that allow for the possibility of significant education concerning them, and of what difference this might make to our view of the place of such ideas in general human education and development. To this end, it will be necessary to engage in some very basic philosophy of education and philosophical theology.

Philosophy of Education and Senses of “Education”

First of all, what do or might we mean by the term “education”? Perhaps the most basic lesson that latter day (analytical) philosophy has to teach about such terms as “knowledge,” “truth,” “freedom,” “(moral) goodness” and “education” is that they are problematic by virtue of diverse or loose common connotation. In this regard, the major twentieth-century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein famously urged that in looking for (the) meaning of a term, we should look to its use in ordinary discourse (Wittgenstein 1953: section 43). Thus, if we look to common popular uses of the term “education,” we

are likely to find that it has a wide variety of different (and perhaps not entirely compatible) senses in different contexts. For example, it is far from clear when someone says (following some unforgettable experience) “that was a real education,” that the sense of education here employed is the same as that implied by the adjective “educated” in “she’s an educated young woman.” Whereas the first sense of education might generally be used of any particular memorable experience that an agent might have, the latter term identifies a particular range of experiences or processes that those we call “educated,” as distinct from uneducated, have undergone or possess.

Indeed it is notable that the term “education” is commonly—if not actually most frequently—used in contemporary educational discourse, theorizing and policy-making as a synonym for that process of institutionalized human learning, usually referred to by the term “schooling.” But there is also a significant sense in which we might want to distinguish education from schooling—in which, precisely, education might seem to be both more and less than schooling. It might seem to be more than schooling insofar as education can and does occur outside schools, and people might even claim that their schooling had failed to educate them. One influential modern movement of radical educational theorizing (aptly termed “de-schooling”) has explicitly maintained that schooling as a (Western) social institution is antithetical to genuine education. So, from this perspective, people may be educated without going to schools or go to schools without becoming—in some other sense of significant learning—educated.

However, although much contemporary educational discourse, theorizing and policy-making continues to be bedeviled by slippage between diverse senses of education, some useful attempts have been made in educational philosophy to provide an account of education that steers a clearer course between such wayward usages. Thus, for example, the influential British post-war educational philosopher R. S. Peters defended a conception of education at some odds with the kind of training or instruction in academic knowledge or vocational skills of the kind promoted—for often instrumental (social and economic) purposes—in much contemporary schooling (Peters 1966). To be sure, it is not that Peters at all deplored such basic socially or economically useful training; it is, rather, that he recognized in the idea of an “educated person” a significant level of learning or acculturation that seems to extend well beyond such utility. Indeed, Peters’ account of education is rich and complex and comprehends at least the following features.

First, education should involve acquisition of knowledge or skill of some general or agreed human significance or value: we should not regard as educational any learning that had generally made a person worse rather than (morally or otherwise) better. Second, such learning should be a matter of “broad” (cultural) initiation; we would not normally consider to be “educated” someone who possessed even a high level of knowledge or expertise of only one kind. Third, such broad initiation should be a matter of depth as well as breadth; it should not be a matter of shallow acquaintance with “inert” facts, but of some understanding of the “reason why” of things. Thus, fourth, educational learning should be distinguished from such other forms of human learning as general socialization, vocational training or (psycho) therapy. Fifth, the learning in question should be a matter of voluntary engagement on the part of the learner—or, at least, it should not be disruptive of learners’ powers of free reflection. In short, education should seek to avoid the indoctrination, conditioning or mind-control of learners.

To be sure, this is obviously a fairly refined sense of “education,” which—though it certainly reflects some aspects of usage (such as its sense in “she’s an educated woman”)—

does not reflect all senses of the term. That said, it is clearly of much theoretical interest and service in reminding us that there is a sense of education that might importantly extend beyond (if not be in some conflict with) the more instrumental purposes of much contemporary schooling. It calls to mind a time-honored sense of (liberal) education—harking back at least to Matthew Arnold's notion of education as initiation into "culture" defined as "the best that has been thought and said in the world" (Gribble 1967)—that emphasizes the "intrinsic" personally formative aspects of human learning, as opposed to (or at least alongside) any socio-economic purposes of schooling. It argues against the advocates of educational utility that young men or women have not necessarily (if at all) been educated when they have been equipped only with the skills of competent auto-repair or hairdressing, since there is a place in any and all human growth and flourishing for knowledge that is worthwhile simply because it broadens the scope of human understanding and appreciation. In this light, for example, we might want to ensure that all children and young people have some exposure in the course of their school education to the spiritually and aesthetically enriching effects of great literature, art and music, irrespective of their eventual (exalted or lowly) vocation.

Of course, for such great modern advocates of liberal democracy as J. J. Rousseau and J. S. Mill, such intrinsically worthwhile knowledge and understanding is also of crucial social and political significance insofar as it is required to develop those powers of rational autonomy or self-determination needed for making informed and critical democratic choices and decisions. Insofar as democratically competent citizens need a broadly rational and critical view of human life and flourishing, and of the role of democratic institutions in the promotion of such (individual and social) flourishing, they also need to have been initiated into those major traditions of open human inquiry that enable such perspective. They need to be acquainted with the science that has freed humans from superstition, with the history that enables some sense of human identity as well as some evaluation of human progress (and/or decline), and (not least) with the great art and literature that has been an enduring source of not just aesthetic and spiritual satisfaction but also of profound insights into the human condition. In this light, the citizens of any flourishing liberal democracy need to be liberally educated persons who are capable of thinking for themselves about the pressing moral, spiritual and political issues of the day, with a view to informed rational decisions and choices regarding further civilized improvement of those societies in which they live. Conversely, competent democratic agents cannot be those who have simply been trained for particular socio-economic roles or functions or indoctrinated, conditioned or "brain-washed" into blind or unreflective acceptance of (political or religious) faiths or ideologies.

Philosophical Theology and the Rational Character of God

But where, one might ask, does this leave religious education or the educational status of learning about (gods or) God? To put this starkly, while it has sometimes been suggested that the cornerstone of Western literary learning is acquaintance with the Bible and Shakespeare, and though one might well recognize some liberal educational case for the study of Shakespeare, what possible educational case might be made for the time-honored grounding of much Western education in study of the Bible (or, alternatively, of non-Western education in study of the Koran)? In short, is there or could there be any genuine rational basis for teaching about God or gods in modern day educational contexts?

For the greater part of the past two thousand years of basically Western Christian culture, it would seem that the very best minds of philosophy were inclined to believe that there was a rational basis for teaching about God. At the very heart of the tradition of natural theology that dominated the intellectual climate of Christendom from early patristic theology to medieval scholasticism are arguments designed not only to prove the existence of God, but to give a substantial account of God's nature (for example, His omniscience, omnipotence and benevolence), His divine activities (as creator of the world and legislator of human conduct) and His relations with the world (particularly through His human incarnation in Jesus Christ). To be sure, key moments in such theological development include the ontological argument of St Anselm and the "Five ways" of St Thomas Aquinas. Similar arguments were also developed over much the same period in other religious traditions, such as, notably, Islam. But while some present-day philosophers and theologians have continued to find such arguments persuasive, the general drift of modern Western (particularly so-called "post-Enlightenment") thought has been far from friendly towards such arguments.

This notwithstanding, the philosopher generally credited with the sharpest break with scholasticism, René Descartes, by no means rejected arguments for God: on the contrary, he fully endorses Anselm's ontological argument. Moreover, the reality of God as guarantor of the reliability of human reason and experience is crucial to the dialectical outcome of Descartes' *cogito*. But the Cartesian shift of epistemic focus from the authority of received tradition to reason and experience (and/or experiment) as the key source of human knowledge also opens the way to radical skepticism about such theological "proofs" on the part of his rationalist and empiricist successors. Such skepticism reaches its high point with two major figures of the high Enlightenment—David Hume and Immanuel Kant—who are both concerned with the same fundamental problem of what within the "bounds of sense" human agents might justifiably be said to know. Hume's skepticism is most radical and he is prepared to grant epistemic credibility to only two types of statement that he refers to as "matters of fact" and "relations of ideas" (Hume 1969 [1739–40]). Indeed, for Hume, even the former—though they represent experiential claims that are at least subject to evidential support—can never be known with certainty; and the latter are merely definitions or rules for the uses of words. But Hume's view of other human judgments—of morality, aesthetics or theology—is that they cannot provide genuine knowledge at all. Indeed, in some of these cases—namely, claims concerning the nature or existence of God—he seems to hold that they cannot make any coherent sense at all.

On the face of it, the main concern of Kant's "first critique" seems to be to refute the dangerous subjectivist tendencies of Hume's epistemology: there, Kant does much to show that there can be objective knowledge of the world apt for expression as reliable general laws (Kant 1968 [1781]). However, the limits of epistemic sense and genuine human enquiry are fixed by Kant no less strictly than by Hume; for him, there can be no meaningful knowledge claims that go beyond the bounds of actual or possible human sense experience. So, while Kant also seeks in his "second critique" to refute Hume's no less subjectivist account of the logic of moral judgment, claiming (with significant debt to Rousseau) that perfectly good rational sense can be made of moral laws or principles, he approaches this by arguing that such laws are not empirical descriptions but forms of rational legislation or prescription: we *make* our moral laws, as it were, rather than *discover* them (see Kant 1968 [1781]). But Kant is hardly less sympathetic than Hume to traditional arguments for the existence of God, and he dismisses all of these as

generating paradoxical or irresolvable logical “antinomies” that exceed the bounds of sense. Thus, in opposition to Anselm’s (and Descartes’) ontological argument, Kant famously objects that existence is not a legitimate predicate: on this view, the question of God’s reality is fatally begged by building (via conceptual sleight of hand) the idea of actual existence into the very notion of God (Kant 1968 [1781]).

Unlike Hume, however, Kant is sympathetic to religious commitment, not least to theism. So, while he does not regard belief in God as supportable by rational proof or empirical evidence in the manner of genuine knowledge (since, of course, God transcends the world of sensible appearances of which we can have such knowledge), he seems to regard religious faith—not least the Lutheran Christianity of his own persuasion—as at least reasonable. All the same, such religious commitment can be only a matter of faith, not of rational knowledge. To be sure, for Kant, some such faith appears warranted by his prescriptivist view of rational moral agency. Insofar as he holds that genuine moral agency is possible only given the empirically unconditioned rational choice of internally consistent moral principles, no coherent sense of such agency seems possible apart from the assumption that human agency is, or can be, free. But, of course, although we might regard moral actions as episodes of free agency, such agency is itself beyond demonstration in the causal-explanatory terms necessary for genuine (Kantian) knowledge: free agency is something that we can assume (for certain practical human purposes), but not prove.

Kant also thinks that a world in which right action is seldom properly rewarded also requires an afterlife in which an appropriate justice of reward and punishment prevails, as well as a divine author of moral law who ensures that it does prevail. Thus, Kant’s presuppositions of practical reason—his so-called “ideas of reason”—include notions of immortality and God as well as that of freedom. But his overall view is that however much we might be drawn to such ideas or find it difficult to avoid employing some of them (such as the idea of free agency) in our day-to-day affairs, such assumptions still cannot have the status of genuine knowledge. And, of course, the powerful impact of such Kantian “fideism” on subsequent Western protestant and other Christian religious thought could hardly be overstated. But we also need to note here the opposing responses that such fideism attracts. On the one hand, many modern religious philosophers and theologians have welcomed the idea that religious belief is a matter of faith rather than rational knowledge as a liberation of faith from the tyranny of reason. On the other hand, however, those opposed to religion have been more inclined to view any admission that religious beliefs cannot be rationally supported as a case for the rejection as irrational of any such faith—not least, as a case for elimination of religion or theism from any rational system of education or schooling.

Towards a Narrative Theology

At all events, it should be clear that any thinking about the place of religious faith or belief in God in public education could hardly be unaffected by post-Kantian doubts about the rationality or otherwise of such faith—even in societies or cultures such as Britain in which the development of public education has had clear religious origins and associations. Indeed, though the only required element of the British school curriculum was, until well into post-war settlement, “a daily act of (Christian) worship,” radical rethinking of religious educational policy has lately been required in the light of major demographic changes (not least mass immigration to Britain from non-Christian

cultures) and associated loss of nerve about received “confessional” approaches to religious education in a new post-war culturally plural climate of liberal democracy.

In this light, it is notable that contemporary British (theoretical and other) educational debates about the legitimacy or otherwise of teaching belief in God are no longer primarily about the meaning or truth of such beliefs (since it seems widely agreed that such beliefs are “essentially contested”), but more about the political pros and cons of faith schooling. The pressing contemporary issue seems to be, rather, that of whether—regardless of the truth or falsity of religious claims—religious parents have a democratic right to school their children in some faith of choice. (And, of course, whereas citizens of faith are largely in favor of this, secularists are mostly against it.) But what no longer seems generally much in doubt—at least outside of specific faith contexts—is that religious education could not reasonably involve, at least in contexts of liberal-democratic public schooling, making any case for the existence of God. It is in this prevailing liberal-democratic climate that one can understand general hostility (outside of fundamentalist circles) to the teaching of “creationism” or “intelligent design” in North American and other Western schools.

Moreover, it is the present view that no one sympathetic to the cause of religious education, including education about the role that notions of divine agency and purpose might be supposed to have played in human affairs, need or should embrace any such ideological pedagogy. To whatever extent one might be persuaded that the order and beauty of the cosmos suggests a divine creator or author, or might find the creation and other stories of Genesis or Vedic scripture profoundly meaningful or moving, it seems mistaken to see any such convictions or perspectives as constituting *knowledge* that might rival, or compete for logical or explanatory space with, modern scientific cosmology or evolutionary theory. From this viewpoint Kant was surely correct to regard any beliefs in or narratives of human freedom, God or immortality as on a different epistemic footing from claims that nothing can travel faster than light or that men and modern apes have a common ancestor. On this view, those acrimonious North American debates between creationists and evolutionists about the school teaching of evolution seem to rest on a category mistake, if it is assumed by either party that the Genesis story constitutes a rival scientific account of the world to the theory of evolution. Briefly, in a Kantian spirit, it seems clear that one ought not to teach Genesis as a possible (literal) “truth” about any world of which we might have actual *knowledge* of the kind promised by the theory of evolution.

One should also beware of drawing the distinction between the kind of knowledge of the world that science offers, and (as we can for now say) non-scientific sources of understanding, too sharply—or in the wrong place. To be sure, science sets out to explain familiar facts of human experience, and there certainly are (despite what post-modernists might say) such facts to be humanly known (for example, that tadpoles turn into frogs, or that what I ate last night in a French restaurant was a frog). We can also fairly claim (short of doubts about our sanity) to know such facts with certainty. But latter day philosophy of science (at least since Karl Popper) has also taught that certainty is not the hallmark of scientific knowledge: that, in short, any understanding of the way known facts enter into general relations with other facts, or are to be precisely explained, is inherently tentative or provisional. Indeed, there might be sources of insight or appreciation that are far more certain than anything to which I might have access by way of evidence-based knowledge. (This might, indeed, be the point behind Wittgenstein’s somewhat counter-intuitive observation that I cannot know that I am in

pain (Wittgenstein 1953: section 246).) In the present context, one might note that the knowledge and/or understanding offered by a current scientific theory (such as the latest hypothesis on causes of liver cancer) could be far less “certain” than the knowledge or understanding of human falsity and deceit that I gain from contemplating the character of Iago in Shakespeare’s *Othello*.

Moreover, despite the more positivist leanings of his pre-Popperian philosophy of science, Kant is clearly aware in his aesthetic writings of the power of great art and literature to provide profound insight precisely into the kinds of ideas of reason that he sees as presupposed by our ability to understand human moral and other association. Although, for him, great literature cannot be a source of the evidentially demonstrable truths of science, and while any understanding of morally right conduct is not to be had by mere reflection upon human nature, great art can nevertheless assist us to sensitive (aesthetic) appreciation of the complexities and nuances of human association. But a pre-modern philosopher who seems to have appreciated the significance for human life of other non-scientific modes of reflection or wisdom far more keenly than Kant was Plato’s great pupil Aristotle. Like Kant, Aristotle drew an important distinction between theoretical reason (not quite, but near enough, the reason required for “scientific” knowledge of the natural world) and the practical reflection or wisdom that he regarded as concerned with moral conduct. Unlike Kant, however, Aristotle’s practical wisdom is not primarily concerned with determining the right thing to do (although it is also concerned with this): rather, it is concerned with the moral formation, or development of moral character, of the exemplary moral agent. The point of moral wisdom is not to discover truths about the world but to help us become morally good people (Aristotle 1941a).

Furthermore, although Aristotle (unlike Plato) subscribed to a naturalist ethics, according to which the development of human moral dispositions (the “virtues”) is an expression of natural human potential, he seems to have held that the growth of such potential requires a broad liberal education in which contemplation of poetry and other arts might play a significant role. Nearer our day, Alasdair MacIntyre’s version of virtue ethics effectively amplifies this point about the human significance of art, literature and other human narratives (MacIntyre 1981, 1987). While MacIntyre’s account seriously (and problematically) departs from Aristotle’s in its idealist (Hegelian) social-constructivist conception of virtue, it also draws on mid-twentieth-century Aristotelian action theory in order to press the point that human agents make sense of their lives through the narratives they relate about themselves and others, rather than through the causal explanations of natural science. Human agents make sense of themselves and their moral or other practical projects more as characters in stories than as blind products or effects of impersonal material causes, and the great narratives of myth, creative art and literature contribute crucially to such understanding of self and others. In this regard, the work of MacIntyre and other recent advocates of the human import of narrative is immensely important in re-asserting the profound educational significance and rightful place of literature and the arts in formal education. In the present context, it is also notable, that such theorists have also regarded religious myths and stories about God and gods as among the most important of identity-constitutive human narratives.

Narrative Theology, Knowledge and Education

That said, it is not obvious that this or any other recent social and moral theorizing has contributed much towards resolving the deep crisis and confusion of current thinking

about the educational status and value of religious learning or learning about religion that is apparent, not just in Western countries such as Britain and the USA (with their albeit different political traditions of thinking about the place of religion in public schooling) but elsewhere in the world. To be sure, much latter day faith in the human value of religious education or narratives of the divine has been profoundly shaken by the modern elevation of scientific or other evidence-based enquiry as the gold standard of human knowledge. If education is essentially about the transmission of knowledge—as many influential educational theories have insisted—then science, history and other evidence-based enquiries can lay claim to an educational value that such non-evidence-based studies as literature and the arts cannot. In this light, the work of philosophers of narrative has greatly served to show that although literature and the arts cannot qualify as evidence-based knowledge they might nevertheless be educationally indispensable from the viewpoint of helping humans to understand themselves as socially constituted moral agents. Nevertheless, the idealist, social-constructivist and/or communitarian turn taken by MacIntyre and many other narrative theorists is more problematic precisely insofar as it tends to regard the (inevitably local) identity-constitutive aspects of narrative as the main educational point and rationale of any educational encounter with literary and other stories.

In the event, such MacIntyrean and other social constructivism is a knife with two edges, neither of which cuts in any particularly helpful direction. On the one hand, on a historicist interpretation of narrative—a notion that is sometimes, in post-modern versions (though not in MacIntyre), even more unhelpfully broadened to include all human knowledge claims—such narratives are liberated from the rigorous epistemic constraints of scientific or other evidence-based knowledge, but at the price of reduction to local social and cultural perspective. On the other hand, by the same token, those inclined to be more rationalistically skeptical of, or hostile to, the educational value of such non-evidence-based (religious or other) narratives are free to dismiss them as mere local fictions. On this view, Bible stories or stories of gods in this or that religious tradition can be consigned to the same epistemic trash can as *Peter Pan* or *Lord of the Rings*. This might, therefore, be the moment to notice that this was not at all Aristotle's view of the human value of literature or arts. Indeed, in his *Poetics* Aristotle writes that poetry "is something more philosophic and of graver import than history," since it is addressed to matters of "universal" more than particular human concern (Aristotle 1941b: 1464). For Aristotle, the poetry and other literature of his day (in which Greek gods turned up with some frequency) is certainly of narrative value (that is, it helps us to understand our lives as moral or other agents); but it is also thereby of greater value than evidence-based history, not because it helps us to identify with local traditions and customs, but because it offers profound insights into a universal human condition.

With regard to the particular concerns of this essay, it is also worth noting that Aristotle's overall (naturalistic) perspective on (religious or other) narratives enables avoidance of two varieties of religious fundamentalism. First, his view that serious myths or stories (in which gods or divine agency might well feature) could be a potent source of universal spiritual or moral insight contrasts with the kind of tribal fundamentalism that is liable to follow from social-constructivist or communitarian readings of narrative: the notion that we should commit ourselves to this or that idea or story, just because it is our idea or story, or that of the group to which we happen to belong. But second, Aristotle's contrast of poetry with history also discourages a no less common literalist fundamentalism: the idea that in order to be inspiring or worth taking seriously,

religious narratives would have to be true in something like an evidence-based historical way. However, on an Aristotelian interpretation of religious or other narratives as closer to poetry than history, it is not that the Christian stories of God's incarnation in the person of Jesus Christ as a divine-human agent who performed miracles and rose from the dead are merely stories that are not, or cannot be, true: it is, rather, that the religious significance or divine status of Jesus could not depend on such miracles and resurrection alone—irrespective of whether these historically occurred. Indeed, it might be that such miracles and resurrection could be scientifically explained without any reference to the divine—or that they might be alternatively dismissed as diabolical events (as early Christians so dismissed the actions of other miracle workers).

The key point here is that the religious or spiritual significance of the *New Testament* gospels or the *Talmud*—no less than the spiritual or moral significance of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Goethe's *Faust* or Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*—is not to be sought in either the identity-constitutive contribution that they might make to one's formation as a Western Christian or a Jew (though they might so contribute), or in their correspondence to historical fact (even if they do so correspond), but in the insights that they are able to provide into such issues and topics of deep moral, theological and other human significance as love, spiritual pride, damnation, redemption and salvation. For despite the spectacular contribution that science and other evidence-based knowledge and enquiry have undoubtedly made to human progress and flourishing, such enquiries are destined—for basically Kantian reasons—to be mute on many of the most urgent of human concerns: precisely, those of how to live with grace, dignity, reverence, humility, character, loyalty and love in a world of unequal providence, injustice, adversity, misfortune, error, wickedness and sin. Ironically, it is the explanatory closure to which human science (at least in principle) aspires—under the constraint of evidence—that inherently precludes any genuine empirical scientific investigation of such concepts and concerns that we could reasonably dignify with the title of objective knowledge. It is, by the same token, the teleological character of human agency and of those reflective and rational powers presupposed by such agency that ensure that concepts of (say) love, forgiveness and atonement—in which such agency is deeply implicated—must remain mysteries to the evidence-seeking knowledge of science. And it is seldom noticed (not least by social scientists) that agency is no less a mystery for being human than divine.

Moreover, though our human understanding of love, forgiveness, atonement and redemption might fall short of the objective knowledge of science, this does not mean that we cannot have certainty with respect to it—something that, as we have seen, we might not have about the latest scientific explanation of liver cancer. In fact, I can be completely certain that I love her—or that she or God loves me—even though I lack (or do not require) evidence-based knowledge of this circumstance, and come to a deepening appreciation of such love through my encounter with the varieties of love explored in sacred or other serious literature on this topic. And this is surely because (in one humanly important sense) love is not a matter of evidence, but of *commitment*—and I might be perfectly sure of my commitment to others or of their commitment to me. Perhaps this is close to what Wittgenstein meant by saying that love is not a feeling, since it can be put to the test (Wittgenstein 1958: section 504); or what Simone Weil meant by saying that love is a destination, not a state of the soul (Weil 1959: 93). So if God is love, or understanding of love is necessary for any real encounter with God (as Christians and other theists believe), then such understanding in the

light of the gospels or other literature might bring one into a surer relationship with Him, even though it can only be vain to hope for certain knowledge of either God or love. And such deeper understanding of either God or love is certainly a candidate for educational concern.

The Educational Place of God, gods and Religion

In the light of post-Kantian skepticism about the epistemic status of (formerly so-called) “religious knowledge,” professional British theorizing about religious education has identified two main approaches to such education, the so-called “confessional” and “phenomenological” approaches, and generally exhibited preference for the latter (at any rate in state schools). The former (which can be close to assuming a fundamentalist literalism about religious claims) channels the initiation of the young (at any rate in “faith” schools) into learning religious truths that are conceived much as the truths of science or history are conceived. The latter (which might be closer to a tribal fundamentalist conception of religion) would teach knowledge of or about the great religions as a way of acquainting the young (perhaps in the name of “tolerance”) with the cultural practices of other social groups. If the arguments of previous sections of this essay are not completely off the mark, then neither of these approaches to religious education is quite on target. The present case is that educational acquaintance with the great religions of the world—particularly with the sacred texts of the great theistic religions—is, in an important (though perhaps not exclusive) sense, more like teaching and learning of great literature. The main point of educational encounter with the *New Testament* or the *Bhagavad Gita*—no less than with Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Malory’s *Morte D’Arthur* or Eliot’s *Four Quartets*—is that despite lacking status as evidence-based knowledge, these are all sources of profound human spiritual and moral wisdom which is not available from any other source and that can be given up only at the very highest cultural, moral and spiritual cost.

Indeed, they cannot or should not be ignored precisely because such sacred texts are not just continuous with, but foundational to, so much subsequent great human literature. For how might one begin to understand the *Divine Comedy*, the *Morte D’Arthur* or the *Four Quartets* without acquaintance with the biblical narratives upon which these other great works have so clearly drawn? (For that matter, how might one understand any of the contemporary events that fill the daily news without understanding the cultural, social and political legacies of the *Talmud*, *Koran* and *New Testament*?) But this, of course, is as true for would-be atheists as religious believers; for atheists are no less disinherited than believers through educational failure to acquaint them with the deep roots of Western and Eastern cultures in the spiritual and moral wisdom of the foundational religious texts. We have conceded that such wisdom cannot and should not be (“confessionally”) taught as claims of (evidence-based) knowledge—because it cannot pass muster as such knowledge. So such wisdom is not to be taught as something that others must believe, but only as a significant contribution to the general conversation of humankind on matters of deep human concern. Nevertheless, it is no less mistaken to treat such religious narratives as mere colorful local fictions that can be adopted or given up as one might give up the wearing of the veil or the crucifix. On the contrary, it is through such great foundational texts that God and/or the gods have spoken; and we ignore their voices at our peril.

Related Topics

Chapter 21: Historical Inquiry; Chapter 25: Moral Inquiry; Chapter 44: Literature; Chapter 47: Narrative; Chapter 48: Community; Chapter 50: Spirituality

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39

BIOETHICS

Paul Copan

In a world of rapid biomedical advances, what is the moral significance of human life? What does it mean to be embodied, finite beings, living between conception and death in this world? Do humans have intrinsic rights that medical practices ought not to infringe, or are “rights” mere legal stipulations (positive law) wholly without ontic status? Is it legitimate to treat humans as a means, say, to some “greater” social end? For instance, could we justifiably harvest the organs of one innocent human being to save or enhance multiple lives lacking those life-sustaining organs? Is human worth contingent upon certain functions such as self-awareness, rationality, decision-making powers, and social skills? What inherent limits, if any, should be placed on medical technology? What are the moral implications of technological advances as they have a bearing on the care or treatment of embodied human beings?

When it comes to bioethics, one’s worldview or philosophy of life is no mere window-dressing. Indeed, it gives shape to the assumptions, practices, and directions in the biomedical field—with immense moral freight bound up with them. In this essay, I shall survey some of the contributions theism makes to bioethics. In doing so, I shall proffer reasons for its metaphysical superiority to competing worldviews. That is, I shall explore key themes regarding theism’s unique vision that offers a remarkably rich context for human flourishing as well as insight and guidance regarding the moral implications of biomedical technology.

The Historical Influences of the Judeo-Christian Metaphysic

While another essay in this volume specifically addresses human rights, I shall say at least something of theism’s contribution here, as key bioethical ramifications flow from the God–human connection. Quite apart from theism’s remarkable metaphysical wherewithal to ground human dignity and human rights over non-theistic alternatives (more on this below), the Jewish-Christian worldview has, as a matter of historical fact, profoundly shaped human rights discourse in the West and has given rise to a host of other moral, social, and spiritual benefits as well (Stark 2005).

J. Habermas reinforces this point. Not only is he one of Europe’s most prominent philosophers, but he is an outspoken atheist as well. Yet he acknowledges this inescapable fact of the profound debt human rights discourse today owes to the biblical worldview:

Christianity has functioned for the normative self-understanding of modernity as more than just a precursor or a catalyst. Egalitarian universalism, from which sprang the ideas of freedom and a social solidarity, of an autonomous conduct

of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights, and democracy, is the direct heir to the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of continual critical appropriation and reinterpretation. To this day, there is no alternative to it. And in light of current challenges of a postnational constellation, we continue to draw on the substance of this heritage. Everything else is just idle postmodern talk.

(Habermas 2006: 150–1)

Indeed, in the words of human rights scholar M. Stackhouse, “intellectual honesty demands recognition of the fact that what passes as ‘secular,’ ‘Western’ principles of basic human rights developed nowhere else than out of key strands of the biblically-rooted religion” (Stackhouse 2004: 25; also Stackhouse and Healey 1996: 486). The fact is, the chief movers establishing a Universal Declaration on Human Rights of 1948 (which speaks of humans being “endowed with reason and conscience”) were primarily church coalitions and individual Christian leaders who worked closely with some Jewish rabbis to create a “new world order” of human rights (Glendon 2001; Stackhouse 2005).

Even non-Westerners have recognized the remarkable impact of the biblical faith on the West. *TIME* magazine’s well-respected correspondent D. Aikman reported the summary of one Chinese scholar’s lecture to a group of eighteen American tourists:

One of the things we were asked to look into was what accounted for the success, in fact, the pre-eminence of the West all over the world,” he said. “We studied everything we could from the historical, political, economic, and cultural perspective. At first, we thought it was because you had more powerful guns than we had. Then we thought it was because you had the best political system. Next we focused on your economic system. But in the past twenty years, we have realized that the heart of your culture is your religion: Christianity. That is why the West has been so powerful. The Christian moral foundation of social and cultural life was what made possible the emergence of capitalism and then the successful transition to democratic politics. We don’t have any doubt about this.

(Aikman 2003: 5; also, Stark 2005: 235)

As it turns out, this lecturer was no tour guide. Rather, he represented one of China’s premier academic research organizations—the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS).

Such an analysis is not surprising. In the Christian tradition, believers are called to follow a suffering Savior. In doing so, they identify with the less fortunate, disempowered, and suffering. In his book on the valuable contribution religion makes to society, agnostic political scientist G. Lewy contrasts the mindset of the naturalist and theist in this regard:

[A]dherents of [a naturalistic] ethic are not likely to produce a Dorothy Day or a Mother Teresa. Many of these people love humanity but not individual human beings with all their failings and shortcomings. They will be found participating in demonstrations for causes such as nuclear disarmament but not sitting

at the bedside of a dying person. An ethic of moral autonomy and individual rights, so important to secular liberals, is incapable of sustaining and nourishing values such as altruism and self-sacrifice.

(Lewy 1996: 137)

The vantage point of history reveals that the impact of theistic belief on recognizing and protecting human rights has been immense.

Theism, Human Rights, and Bioethics

From the cradle of biblical theism and its emphasis on human rights, the field of bioethics emerged in the early 1960s. Indeed, the impulse to defend human rights took on greater urgency in light of, say, the Tuskegee syphilis experiments and the *Roe v. Wade* decision in the early 1970s. D. Callahan, who has been closely associated with the emergence of the modern bioethics movement and is co-founder of the Hastings Center, writes of the theological context that first informed this field. "When I first became interested in bioethics in the mid-1960s, the only resources were theological or those drawn from within the traditions of medicine, themselves heavily shaped by religion" (Callahan 1990: 2). Though earlier inspired by theism, more recent bioethical thinking has become more secularized, emphasizing the philosophical and legal rather than the religious and the medical and engaging in "a systematic denial of either a common good or a transcendent individual good" (ibid.).

Likewise, A. R. Jonsen's account of the "birth of bioethics" gives full credit to biblical theism's influence:

The Judeo-Christian religious tradition, with its strong emphasis on divine commands that enforce respect for the sanctity of life, enhanced the prohibitions of abortion and euthanasia that are obscurely expressed in the [Hippocratic] Oath and prescribed caring compassion for the poor and even enemies. The literature of medical duty is profoundly marked by these moral traditions.

(Jonsen 1998: 7)

The ethicist perhaps most closely tied to the founding of modern bioethics was P. Ramsey (1913–88), a Methodist professor. Ramsey was firmly convinced that human value is "ultimately grounded in the value God is placing on it." Moreover, this value applies equally across the human spectrum, including the very beginning of life:

[M]an is a sacredness in human biological processes no less than he is a sacredness in the human social or political order. That sacredness is not composed of observable degrees of relative worth. A life's sanctity consists not in its worth to anybody. What life is in and of itself is most clearly to be seen in situations of naked equality of one life with another, and in the situation of congeneric helplessness which is the human condition in the first [stage] of life. No one is ever much more than a fellow fetus.

(Ramsey 1968: 12–13)

Truly, the link between theism, human rights, and bioethics is no mere historical accident. Rather, the metaphysically rich resources of biblical theism—with its emphasis

on the divine image and the sanctity of all human life—are credited with providing the suitable worldview context for bioethics.

Human Rights and the Metaphysical Capital of Rival Worldviews

While we can easily see how theism, with its concern for human rights, gave existence and shape to the relatively recent development of bioethics, we would justifiably be surprised if a worldview like naturalism would do so. B. Russell's oft-quoted paragraph on the bleak and depressing worldview of metaphysical naturalism is a revealing picture of humanity's status in the cold cosmos:

That man is the product of causes that had no prevision of the end they were achieving. That his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves, his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms. That no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling can preserve an individual life beyond the grave. That all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspirations, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man's achievements must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins. All these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation, henceforth, be safely built.

(Russell 1963: 41)

Such a worldview context bodes ill for grounding intrinsic human worth—the fulcrum for central bioethical considerations (Smith 2009).

R. Dawkins has a similarly stark naturalistic outlook:

If the universe were just electrons and selfish genes, meaningless tragedies . . . are exactly what we should expect, along with equally meaningless *good* fortune. Such a universe would be neither evil nor good in intention . . . The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference.

(Dawkins 1993: 132–3)

Naturalism generally maintains that all of our thoughts, decisions, actions, and emotions are physical events, which are themselves produced by prior physical events all the way back to the Big Bang. Though naturalists commonly acknowledge that such a view runs contrary to our most basic intuitions, they insist that our choices are shaped by forces beyond our control; the buck does not stop with some supposed morally responsible agent. Naturalism informs us that our moral beliefs are hardwired into us for survival and the production of progeny. It's not that humans have actual duties, but genetically contrived illusions that we do. Nor do humans have intrinsic value since they have emerged from valueless "collocations of atoms." (For a summary of naturalism's key tenets, see www.naturalism.org.) The ontological price exacted by naturalism is indeed a high one, and this is quite apparent when it comes to bioethics.

Theism stands out in marked contrast to naturalism both with respect to its stance on the foundations for human dignity and worth and its worldview implications in the field of bioethics. Theism affirms that a personal, good, and powerful God has created the universe *ex nihilo*, not requiring some pre-existent matter to shape into an orderly universe. Further, this being has made human beings—male and female—“in the image of God” (Genesis 1:27). The implications of a Creator have a great bearing on human dignity, worth, moral responsibility, and duties, and this directly impacts the field of bioethics.

Of course, naturalism and theism are not the only metaphysical games in town. For example, one could introduce an array of Eastern religious and philosophical outlooks, in which “the notion of a personal God is altogether less prominent” (Smart 1986: 161). For example, the Advaita Vedanta school of Hinduism considers all distinctions illusory (*maya*), and the self or soul (*atman*) is ultimately the impersonal, undifferentiated Oneness (*Brahman*). No metaphysical room remains for distinguishing between human beings or selves—and thus no individual personal worth for human individuals. The same could be said for Buddhism with its no-self doctrine (*anatman*); individual human beings are ever-changing bundles of properties without any enduring soul or self to unify them.

Whether naturalism or the range of non-theistic worldview alternatives, these singularly fail to furnish an adequate metaphysical context for affirming human dignity, worth, and rights (Copan 2007, 2009; Linville 2009). However much the Western naturalist or the Eastern pantheist and monist might refer to human dignity or the sacredness of (human) life, their metaphysic lacks sufficient resources for affirming how such intrinsic dignity could arise from valueless processes or from an impersonal Ultimate Reality. Again, these have a bearing on the foundations for bioethical concerns.

What is the image of God? Theologians have suggested essentialist, relational, functional, and eschatological proposals of how this is to be understood (Copan 2012). By virtue of divine creation, “we have some residual capacity to reason, to will, and to love that is given to us as an endowment that we did not achieve by our own efforts” (Stackhouse 2004: 27). Despite human fallenness, the image of God implies that each person has dignity, “whatever his or her condition, status, or behavior.” This image cannot be violated “without violating the source of that which is right and true, just and loving” (Stackhouse 1986: 14). Furthermore, each person is called to use these God-given capacities to engage in particular relational networks as part of our role to be just, loving agents on earth (Stackhouse 2004: 27).

God, the *imago Dei* and the Metaphysical Basis for Human Dignity

In this portion of the chapter, I explore the varied ramifications of theism on bioethics.

All Humans as God's Image-bearers

Utilitarian Peter Singer distinguishes between *persons* and *humans*. While the theist can distinguish between these two categories (saying, for example, that non-human persons such as angelic beings or the divine persons of the Trinity can exist), most theists would insist that no human exists who is not also a person.

Theism has typically stressed the fundamental ontological priority of human nature or personhood (as derived from divine personhood) to give shape to ethical

considerations and actions. Such a view opposes functionalism, which defines human personhood in terms of the functioning of consciousness, mental abilities, goal-setting abilities, and so on. Because human beings are substances with hierarchically ordered capacities, even if certain capacities are not *presently functioning* in some human beings, such capacities continue to exist (latently) because the human *whole* is ontologically prior to its *parts*. These capacities exist even if they are physically blocked from being realized (for example, by Down's syndrome or Alzheimer's).

Furthermore, we do not exercise them continuously, for example, when we are asleep or are knocked unconscious. Such a realization about personhood clarifies many bioethical issues, which have been made fuzzy by physicalistic and naturalistic anthropologies. We have an obligation to care for all human beings—whether mentally and physically functioning in normal or abnormal states and at varying maturity levels—and to do harm to none. The theist can argue with consistency for the rights and intrinsic value of persons ranging from the unborn (they possess personhood as the rest of us, needing only the time and environment to mature) to the elderly and mentally retarded (Moreland and Rae 2000).

According to Christian theism, human dignity is not only rooted in the *imago Dei* but is also reinforced by the Incarnation and Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, who came to redeem humanity. Humans are ends rather than means; they have, as Kant put it, “worth,” not “price” within the “kingdom of ends”—the human community (Kant 1998). Thus, (Christian) theism rejects the standard secular utilitarian ethic, in which human individuality and individual humans are subordinated to the concerns of the group—the greatest good for the greatest number.

The unique value of human beings is evident in their capacity for freedom or personal responsibility as well as reasoning—not to mention the capacity to know and relate to God through God's gracious provision in Christ. But this does not mean that the unborn or the elderly with dementia are less valuable because they are not fully developed or they are physically blocked from realizing these and other inherent capacities. Aristotle does not have more value than Joe the Plumber because the former towers over the latter in powers of ratiocination.

Thus, when we sacrificially care for those who cannot care for themselves—whatever their intellectual or physical function or social-skill level, we celebrate a love for life—for theirs and ours. Instead of being guided by some subjective “quality of life,” we, in our care for the elderly and the chronically ill, display “a crucial act for witnessing our celebration of their lives and ours” (Hauerwas et al. 1977: 114).

Humans as Distinct from Non-human Animals

According to classical theism, human beings are distinguished from other creatures in that they possess the *imago Dei*. Humans are “imaging” creatures that resemble God, though in limited ways. Humans have certain capacities that distinguish them from non-human animals—free will, intrinsic dignity and worth, moral responsibility, the capacity to reason deeply and reflect on life, self-awareness, spirituality, and the like.

These features of our humanity distinguish humans from non-human animals. That non-humans lack these features is why we are justified in intentionally putting suffering animals to death (“out of their misery”), but are not justified in intentionally taking innocent human life. A difference exists between the *human* and the *humane*.

As L. Kass reminds us:

We put dumb animals to sleep because they do not know that they are dying, because they can make nothing of their misery or mortality, and, therefore, because they cannot live deliberately—i.e., humanly—in the face of their own suffering and dying. They cannot live out a fitting end. Compassion for their weakness and dumbness is our only appropriate emotion, and given our responsibility for their care and well-being, we do the only humane thing we can. But when a conscious human being asks us for death, by that very action he displays the presence of something that precludes our regarding him as a dumb animal. Humanity is owed humanity, not humaneness.

(Kass 1990: 42)

Yes, certain non-human animals might have overlapping capacities with humans—utilizing means of communication, living in “societies,” figuring out how to adapt to different situations, and so on. But the remarkable differences between human beings and animals in terms of, say, free will, moral responsibility, and spiritual awareness, and reflecting on life’s meaning ought not to be minimized (Oderberg 2000: ch. 3).

Human dignity is an entailment of the divine image, and theism views humans as the pinnacle of God’s creation—not to abuse or despoil the world or its creatures, but to care for them as stewards and as co-rulers with God over creation.

Human Life as a God-given Gift

According to theism, human life is no mere metaphysical surd or accident of nature. The psalmist affirms that even in his mother’s womb he was “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalms 139:14, NASB), and Israel’s prophetic literature uses related language to express the value of the unborn (Isaiah 49:5; Jeremiah 1:5). Later in the New Testament, even John the Baptist was filled with God’s Spirit and was said to have “leaped for joy” while in his mother’s womb (Luke 1:15, 44; cp. 1:42; 2:21). Indeed, all children should be welcomed as a “gift of the LORD” (Psalms 127:3). The psalmist elsewhere calls on God not to forsake them when they are old and gray (71:9, 18). In Proverbs the elderly or gray-haired are affirmed as worthy of honor (Proverbs 16:31; 20:29): “Listen to your father who begot you, and do not despise your mother when she is old” (23:22).

Thus, from the womb to life’s end, the human possesses dignity and worth as God’s image-bearer. Neither age nor (lack of) certain physical functions diminish the dignified status of a human being. With God, there are no “potential human beings” as opposed to “actual human beings”—no more so than a woman being “somewhat pregnant.”

One clear bioethical implication is that it is always wrong to intend to take innocent human life. As I note below, while we should not refuse to acknowledge inevitable death, we should not go to the other extreme of hastening it. Each of these extremes is actually an act of abandonment of, rather than caring for, the individual: “To try to do more by seizing either of the extremes is always to give something other or less than care” (Meilaender 1995: 62).

Rather than attempting to justify taking the lives of comatose or “persistent vegetative state” patients, we must remember that they are neither guilty of wrongdoing nor unworthy of life; they are simply in a bad way not of their own choosing. As R. J. Neuhaus has written:

But the thought insinuates itself that they are “guilty” of being a burden to others. It is . . . strange that the same people who describe ours as a society driven by selfishness and greed are, at the same time, so insouciant about giving permission to kill others whom they find burdensome. When it comes to terminating the lives of others, the selfish and greedy will presumably act in selfless devotion to the well-being of others.

(Neuhaus 1991: 54)

Qualifying “the Sanctity of Human Life”

Yahweh declares in Deuteronomy 32:39: “There is no god besides Me.” It is this God who has authority to “put to death and give life.” This relates to creation, but it also applies to redemption as well. St Paul asks: “do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?” As all humans are not only God’s image-bearers but potential recipients of redemption, Paul reminds his audience: “you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body” (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). Whether we speak of biological or spiritual life, both are gifts from God, and the proper human response ought to be gratitude rather than clutching life as our possession or that which is owed us by God.

Given that God is the author and giver of life, we must be careful not to take the “sanctity of life” to idolatrous ends. Theism corrects the false assumption that life ought to be sustained at all costs or that we are the sovereign masters of our fate. We are contingent (and fallen) creatures who have, yes, been uniquely made and endowed, but our status stands in sharp contrast to the benevolent, necessarily-existent, self-sufficient God. Thus we can hardly claim absolute ownership of our own (or our child’s) life—only responsible stewardship of it, as long as God grants us life.

Although *no person has the right to take her own life* (or to ask a doctor to take it from her), she is *not* morally obligated to take whatever medical treatment she can. An elderly person who might die within a half year from cancer certainly has the right to refuse medical treatment (for example, chemo-therapy/radiation treatment). In the face of looming death, some patients “may form their death in quite a different way consistent with their character, not fighting but calmly accepting death,” while others might wish to “fight to the end, utilizing all available medical technology” (Hauerwas 1981: 184). Yet withholding or withdrawing treatment from one who is inevitably, irreversibly dying is morally permissible. Such an act is certainly in keeping with the psalmist’s prayer to God: “My times are in your hands” (Psalms 31:15, NRSV). Though death is an enemy—an affront to human dignity—this enemy does not have the last word in the face of God’s sovereign rule.

Individual Rights not Opposed to Community Well-being

Because human life is a gift from God, certain rights will flow from this status.

Individual human rights cannot be set in opposition to community or societal well-being. Just as the triune God creates human beings (“male and female”) to co-rule with him, the human is not some atomized, detached individual, but belongs to a broader community and culture that gives shape to and builds character into our lives. For example, if a deformed baby is born to parents, their first concern should not be their “rights” or “fulfillment,” but rather being the kind of parents for this gift entrusted to

them by God. Hauerwas correctly remarks that the language of “rights” will “teach us little about the kinds of skills we need to train ourselves to take on that kind of task” (Hauerwas 1986: 140). Indeed, when freedom and its enhancement becomes an end in itself, “we lose any account of human life that gives content and direction to freedom” (ibid.: 14).

Moreover, a common, but morally misguided, notion of “reproductive freedom” or “control over my body” is often used to treat others unjustly—namely, the unborn, who have no say in the matter. And when children are brought into the world as the parents’ source of “self-fulfillment,” this mindset, as mentioned, will “teach us little about the kinds of skills we need to train ourselves to take on that kind of task” of nurturing and bringing up children as we ought (ibid.: 140).

Reflecting on the theme of children as a gift, J. T. Burtchaell asserts that while birth control is *not* morally objectionable in itself (though some within the theistic tradition disagree here), he offers this warning to many professing Christians in the US, whose mindset and lifestyle suggest that children are more a bother than a blessing.

[T]he ease with which American Christians have begun to fend off children betrays a selfishness that corrupts our sense of Christian marriage. . . . There is nothing within our tradition of moral wisdom that obliges Christians to maximize their output of children. Yet there is something very sterile and sinister in our growing propensity to associate “choice” with reproductive decisions. In childbearing we forfeit many choices—and find joy.

(Burtchaell 1991: 44)

Death Is Not the Ultimate Evil

On a theistic account, death is not a dignified event. Rather, it is an indignity and affront to our humanity, and one ought not to seek it out. According to Christian theism, death has lost its sting through the bodily resurrection of Jesus, whose new embodied life is a precursor to the believer’s. Thus, one need not live in fear of death, as though it is an evil. The follower of Christ can have confidence in the face of death, recognizing that death need not be postponed at all costs.

God has created human beings for this purpose: to live in harmonious relationship with God and fellow creatures. What is right, then, is that which promotes the kingdom or rule of God. The exception-less rule for each human being—indeed, for the benefit of each human being—is this: “One ought to promote the Kingdom of God” (Layman 1991: 52, 53). Life lived under God’s rule means a life of service to God and others, and we can live life with courage and grace in the midst of its challenges and ambiguities. Yet the time comes when we no longer fight death, but accept its inevitability (Hauerwas et al. 1977: 36). While humans are called to protect against the taking of innocent life, they are not morally obligated to postpone inevitable death. Moreover, though we consider self-sacrifice praiseworthy and virtuous, the laying down of one’s brief life for another makes little naturalistic sense. The well-recognized ultimate altruism of sacrificing one’s life for another is startlingly irrational without the backdrop of God and thus immortality. Why surrender the only, and all-too-brief, existence one will ever have?

The Place of Suffering

Theism takes for granted that enduring suffering in doing God's will is the lot of the believer. Suffering is to be borne and hardship endured because of the calling to love God and neighbor, the lure of maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain notwithstanding. Not all suffering is to be avoided, and preventing all suffering is not obviously a virtue.

Some medical practitioners forget that they must always care, even when they cannot cure. Not all suffering is to be ended simply because medical alternatives have been exhausted. (Witness the theistic roots of the founding of the hospice movement.) When patients are euthanized to "spare" them further suffering, the tragic irony is that their lives should be extinguished to achieve this. Furthermore, the fear of the living is that the chronically ill will live on, and it is the living who often want to be spared of hardship, not the ill.

Suffering itself can be very subjective, and more often than not, suffering is internal and psychological rather than external and physical. A Down's syndrome child might be quite happy-go-lucky and well-removed from any sense of suffering. On the other hand, we ought not to seek suffering all the while recognizing that our lives are often deepened and our characters shaped in the face of great suffering. The valuable life is not necessarily one free of suffering (Hauerwas et al. 1977: 167–8).

When it comes to physical or mental disabilities, an Eastern karmic perspective (such a condition is payback for deeds in the previous life) could lead to a certain passivity and a stance of non-interference. However, theism views such disabilities as opportunities for the "works of God" to be "displayed," as in the case of the man born blind (John 9:3). The glory and strength of God can often be evidenced through weakness and suffering (2 Corinthians 12:10). Rather than receive a birth defect passively or fatalistically (perhaps as a curse), theism urges human engagement and action. In the words of Jesus: "We must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is still day" (John 9:4). Indeed, Jesus himself routinely engaged in physically healing persons who were "born that way." Yet without giving even a compassionate embrace or lending a merciful hand, our calling another's disability a "blessing" might prove our words a sham (Yong 2007).

Fallenness, Humility, and Scientific "Progress"

According to traditional theism, our earliest ancestors' fall away from God produced a spiritual death and alienation—a breach in humanity's fellowship with God and with fellow human beings. This has led to injustice, violence, and the exclusion of human beings from one other. One bioethical expression of fallenness is "euthanizing" the mentally disabled and physically handicapped since they do not somehow "contribute to society."

In light of human fallenness, consistent theists will remember their proper place in the world: God is Creator and we are creatures. God is infinite and wise; we are finite and often foolish and arrogant. Hubris in the disciplines of science and medicine can easily grow to gargantuan proportions; this poses a great danger when it comes to doctors, who ought to be vigilant in guarding their art. Technological capacities are not self-justifying, and wisdom often calls for restraint and even refusal to embark on certain life-altering courses. The amazing power wielded over life and death in the bioethical realm needs the tempering of humility and awareness of our proper place in the world.

Not all things that are possible are thereby beneficial or moral. Knowledge can edify or destroy. Exploring latent capacities or undiscovered possibilities is not identical to moral progress. Humans are capable of producing pornography and developing biological weapons or dirty bombs, but we ought not to pursue such endeavors.

Writing from a Jewish perspective, L. Kass puts this hubris into proper perspective as it applies to social and genetic engineering and euthanasia:

Do we know what constitutes a deterioration or an improvement in the human gene pool? Might one not argue that, at least under present conditions, the crusaders against the deterioration of the species are worried about the wrong genes? After all, how many architects of the Vietnam War or the suppression of Solidarity suffered from Down's syndrome? Who uses up more of our irreplaceable natural resources and who produces more pollution: the inmates of an institution for the retarded or the graduates of Harvard College? . . . It seems indisputable that the world suffers more from the morally and spiritually defective than from the genetically defective.

(Kass 1985: 46)

He adds that when humans hold awesome, potentially dehumanizing power in their hands, such capacities at our disposal may require a "wisdom we do not possess." But,

[i]n the absence of such wisdom, we can be wise enough to know that we are not wise enough. To repeat: When we lack sufficient wisdom to do, wisdom consists in not doing. Restraint, caution, abstention, delay are what this second-best (and maybe only) wisdom dictates with respect to baby manufacture, and with respect to other forms of human engineering made possible by other new biomedical technologies.

(Ibid.: 78)

Similarly, the Christian writer C. S. Lewis elaborates on this perspective:

In reality of course, if any one age really attains, by eugenics and scientific education, the power to make its descendants what it pleases, all men who live after it are the patients of that power. They are weaker, not stronger; for though we may have put wonderful machines in their hands, we have pre-ordained how they are to use them. . . . Man's conquest of Nature, if the dreams of some scientific planners are realized, means the rule of a few hundreds of men over billions upon billions of men. There neither is nor can be any simple increase of power on Man's side. Each new power won *by* man is a power *over* man as well. Each advance leaves him weaker as well as stronger. In every victory, besides being the general who triumphs, he is also the prisoner who follows the triumphal car.

(Lewis 1965: 69–71)

Our capacity to abuse moral freedom to dehumanize fellow-humans is amply illustrated throughout history. Yet theism furnishes the resources to help keep creaturely hubris in check and place a metaphysical hedge of protection around the most vulnerable among us.

Conclusion

In a post-Holocaust age, Protagoras' dictum that "man is the measure of all things" must be rejected. J. Calvin rightly affirmed that for human creatures to understand themselves aright, they must first rightly understand their infinitely great Creator. Doing so reminds us of our proper place in the cosmos. This includes not only an awareness of our human condition and the need for redemption, forgiveness, and purification; it also includes an awareness of human dignity and the requirement to love our neighbor as we already love ourselves. This dignity is derived not from humans but from God, who is the locus of value, meaning, and purpose.

This theistic metaphysical grounding of human value and rights serves as a guide to protect human life from "the least," the "other," and the oft unnoticed in the human community. This means that human endeavors in medicine and technology should hold in check any biomedical "progress" that usurps the Creator's role and undermines the status of human dignity and the ends for which God has created us. Theism truly offers both moral solidity and richness to the bioethical landscape.

Related Topics

Chapter 25: Moral Inquiry; Chapter 31: Civil Society; Chapter 32: Human Rights; Chapter 34: Law

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Recommended Reading

- Baggett, D. and J. Walls (2011) *Good God: The Theistic Foundations of Morality*, New York: Oxford University Press. An accessible exposition of the moral argument.
- Copan, P. (2009) "Theism, Naturalism, and the Foundations of Morality," in R. Stewart (ed.), *The Future of Atheism*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press. A summary of key points defending the moral argument and the inadequacy of non-theistic ethical theories.
- Moreland, J. P. and S. B. Rae (2000) *Body and Soul: Human Nature and the Crisis in Ethics*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. A defense of an integrated Aristotelian-Thomistic substance dualism as well as theism's capacity to inform fundamental bioethical issues better than naturalistic alternatives.

ANIMALS

Stephen R. L. Clark

The forms of theism most familiar (though not necessarily best known) to a Western audience are the Abrahamic: Christian, Muslim and Jewish. Each of those traditions can also be subdivided (Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Humanist; Shia, Sufi, Wahhabi, Ahmadiyya; Orthodox, Conservative, Hasidic, Reform and so on). (The opening section is a revised version of a short article “In Our Hands,” *Reform* October 2008: 17–18. I profited from discussion of these issues at the Colloquium at St Deiniol’s Library, Hawarden, 2–4 November 2007. The results of that Colloquium have since been published as Deane-Drummond and Clough 2009.) Other varieties of theism include the pagan Greek, African and Hindu. Such stories and doctrines as they have in common, or dispute about, are discussed in other chapters of this volume. Almost all—with the partial exception of some Hindu varieties—suppose that God cares most for human beings, and that human beings are closest of all God’s creatures to the divine. Quite what follows from that assumed resemblance is unclear.

Even Westerners who self-identify as “post-religious” or “atheistical” are likely to be influenced by the Hebrew myth, and it is from this tale that I take my start. In the beginning God made heaven and earth, and created man “in His own image” (Genesis 1:26). A little later, in the post-diluvian new beginning, He gave all other living things into our hands (Genesis 9.3). The moral—or so many moralists have reckoned—is that God only cares about people, and that everything else exists only to help us out. Ancient Greek philosophers often agreed: pigs, so the Stoics frivolously thought, were only locomotive meals, with souls instead of salt to keep them fresh (Porphyry 2000: 91 (3.20.1)). Anyone who thought otherwise, who reckoned that non-human creatures were to be valued “in their own right,” or that we should pay any attention to their interests, must “obviously” disrespect humanity. God was to be seen only in human form. Virgil’s ambiguous epic in praise of Roman power imagined that true Romans had to fight against the multiform monstrosities of the corrupting East: “every kind of monstrous god and barking Anubis too” (Virgil *Aeneid* 8.699). Even the first-century Platonist Plutarch (who himself respected animals) suggested that portraying the gods as animals must lead “the weak and innocent into ‘superstition’ (*deisidaimonia*), and the cynical and bold into ‘atheistic and bestial reasoning’ (*atheos kai theriodes logismos*)” (Gilhus 2006: 98, after Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris* 379E; Plutarch 1936: 165). Similar charges are still made against Hindus, for reverencing cows or monkeys.

These notions are still influential, even amongst those who would disclaim any “literal” or historical understanding of the early chapters of Genesis, and who have few other points of agreement with Greek philosophers or Roman propagandists. But this is not the only, nor the best, tradition in either Hebrew or Greek thought. God hates

nothing that He has made: why else would He have made it (Wisdom of Solomon 11:24)? Genesis begins with God's glad creation, His considered judgement that all that He has made is good. The more usual Greek philosophical opinion was that the world had no beginning, but that it managed to embody, however feebly, all the forms of beauty present in the Divine. It was dependent on that Divinity, and showed us elements of Divinity. For Greek and Hebrew alike we—that is to say, we humans—were “in the image of God” in that we could appreciate His work, not that we were given licence to use it as we pleased. Even if God intended us, in some sense, to be His vice-roys, *God's* kingship, and our vice-regal duty, cannot be that of heathen kings, of the sort described by Samuel (I Samuel 8:11–19)!

The word of the Lord to Ezekiel:

Prophecy, man, against the shepherds of Israel: prophecy and say to them, You shepherds, these are the words of the Lord God: How I hate the shepherds of Israel who care only for themselves! Should not the shepherd care for the sheep? You consume the milk, wear the wool, and slaughter the fat beasts but you don't feed the sheep. You have not encouraged the weary, tended the sick, bandaged the hurt, recovered the straggler, or searched for the lost; and even the strong you have driven with ruthless severity. . . . I will dismiss these shepherds: they shall care only for themselves no longer; I will rescue my sheep from their jaws, and they shall feed on them no longer.

(Ezekiel 34:1ff.)

The words have an obvious allegorical significance, concerning the relations of the ruling classes and their human subjects—but the allegory makes no sense unless real shepherds were really meant to care for sheep, as Plato also proposed (*Republic* 1.345b). Until the early nineteenth century the only body of law that demanded such attention to the needs of our domestic animals was the Torah. “You shall not muzzle the ox that treads out the corn” (Deuteronomy 25:4). “You shall not yoke ox and ass together” (Deuteronomy 22:10). These commands mean more than their immediate sense suggests: the implication is that the animals who work and suffer for us shall not be refused their pay, nor put to work in ways that do not suit their natures. “A righteous man cares for his beast: but a wicked man is cruel at heart” (Proverbs 12:10). Even if it is, somehow and sometimes, allowable to slaughter beasts for their flesh, we are not to consume their *blood*, which is to say the life they have from God—and how that trick is to be managed, we do not clearly know (Genesis 9:4; Leviticus 17:10–11; Deuteronomy 12:23; Acts 15:20). Even such acts as do them no special harm, but which can only issue from contempt for those other lives, are forbidden. As the first-century Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria, insisted, commenting on Exodus 23:19:

The man who seethes the flesh of any [lamb or kid] in the milk of its own mother is exhibiting a terrible perversity of disposition, and exhibits himself as wholly destitute of that feeling which, of all others, is the most indispensable to, and most nearly akin to, a rational soul, namely, compassion.

(Philo 1998, vol. 3: 31, *On the Virtues*, 144)

Similar commands are given for our relations with undomesticated animals. We are not to take both mother and young from any nest (Deuteronomy 22:6f.), nor plough up

all the fields and so deny food to the poor, the stranger or the wild things in our country (Leviticus 19:9f., 23:22, 26:6f.). If we did, we would be thrown out of the land: we enjoy it on condition that we do not take it wholly for ourselves. “The whole world has rest and is at peace; it breaks into cries of joy. The pines themselves and the cedars of Lebanon exult over you: since you have been laid low, they say, no man comes up to fell us” (Isaiah 14:7f.; see also Leviticus 26:34).

So how has it happened that we have so easily, and for so long, forgotten this? It is easy to allegorize the commands, in line with a passing and ambiguous remark of the Apostle Paul, with regard to the muzzling of oxen: “Does God care for cattle?” (I Corinthians 9:9). The proper answer, obviously, is Yes, since “all the beasts of the forest are [His] and the cattle in thousand on [His] hills. [He] knows every bird on those hills, and the teeming life of the fields is [His] care” (Psalm 50:10–11). *Maybe*, He will take still greater care for us—or else demand more of us. We have told ourselves that only *human beings* are like God in being “rational,” but we must acknowledge that it is not the *cleverest* of His creatures, but the “hundred and twenty thousand who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and cattle without number,” in whose name and for whose sake He spares Nineveh (Jonah 4:11)! And it is children who are closest to the kingdom (Matthew 19:14). Rationalist philosophers have sometimes consoled themselves by thinking that it is their *intelligence*, their grasp of argument, which makes them kin to God. Not even all Greek philosophers thought the same: the point where we are brought close to God, for Plotinus and other Platonists, was *love* much more than reasoning, since God is love—and love requires justice. As a later Platonist, Anne Conway (1631–79), declared:

[A]ny man who is just and good loves the brute creatures which serve him, and he takes care of them so that they have food and rest and the other things they need. He does not do this only for his own good but out of a principle of true justice.

(Conway 1996: 35)

The “rational mind” which Philo mentions, and to which compassion is the closest of our passions, is not simply *cleverness*, but recognizing what is real, beautiful, and deserving of our care. The divine is seen in one who delighted in children, wild flowers, ravens, sparrows, sheep and even dogs (see Matthew 6:26ff., 15:26ff., 18:12ff.). Cruelty, pride and injustice get in the way of recognizing Him, and of recognizing His creatures. Maybe they are “in our hands” for now, but for that very reason we might reasonably expect to give Him some account of how we deal with them.

Folk Wisdom and Philosophy

Although there are pointers toward a “creature-friendly” theology in the Hebrew and the Greek traditions, theologians and philosophers in the Western mainstream have usually assumed that God cares mainly or even entirely for *human beings*. Even atheistical philosophers who deny that there either is or could be a single, all-loving, all-knowing judge, assume without argument that the only “rational” morality is one of respect for humanity. “Reason” alone is King—and we are kings when we are one with it (Plotinus *Ennead* V.3 [49].3, 46ff.)—but “reason” is a misleading translation of *nous*, the awe-struck appreciation of beauty in the cosmos and in individual creatures.

Rationalists identify all creatures other than the human as material for our purposes, whatever they might be. That they are thus “material” (having no worthwhile goals or interests of their own) might further imply that they have no “souls” at all: they are nothing else but meat. Children and sentimentalists imagine that their actions and their gaze “mean something”—but children and sentimentalists might feel the same about computers, cuddly toys or cartoon figures. This doctrine is late dawning: even though Stoic philosophers denied that non-human animals could reason, they rarely supposed that non-human animals were insentient. The feelings that we should ourselves control were ones we shared with them: anger, greed and fear. And many non-human animals clearly have sharper sight or hearing than we do. They might lack “*rational* souls,” and so not be self-aware, or capable of considering their own emotions or “beliefs” in the light of a larger purpose, but they share “animal souls” with us. Michel de Montaigne went further:

By what comparison between them and us does [man] infer the stupidity that he attributes to them? When I play with my cat, who knows if she is making more a pastime of me than I of her? . . . The same defect that prevents communication between them and us, why is it not as much our fault as theirs? We can only guess whose fault it is that we do not understand one another, for we do not understand them any more than they understand us. By the same reasoning they may consider us stupid beasts, just as we consider them.

(Montaigne 2003: 15–16)

Anyone acquainted with non-human animals, whether in a domestic, a laboratory or an agricultural setting, and still more in the wild, is likely—unless they are behaviourists or psychopaths—to act on the assumption that animals have feelings and a point of view. If nothing else this might save people from being bitten (see Hebb 1946). It is only in the abstract that we can easily pretend that they do not—and thereby excuse to ourselves the uses that we make of them.

The commoner folk-understanding of our difference from the non-human is that our intelligence opens up a wider world than theirs: animals live for today, “by instinct,” and do all and only what they need to survive and reproduce. We on the other hand are preoccupied with what cannot be seen or felt. We tell stories, dream dreams, imagine ourselves elsewhere and in other lives. We conceive of times before we were born, or before any human being was born, of places so distant that their light has not yet reached us, or counterfactual possibilities so remote as to be almost incomprehensible. We even imagine that justice might one day be done, and that there is a place or an age or another world where “the wolf shall live with the sheep, and the leopard lie down with the kid; the calf and the young lion shall grow up together, and a little child shall lead them” (Isaiah 12.6). Human beings live in two worlds, whether or not they give any “spiritual” significance to the “other” world, the one that is not immediately present to our senses, but imagined. Human beings have to deal with that dichotomy, and somehow bring the sense-world and the imaginal together.

On the one hand, non-human animals (we imagine) live solely in the sense-world suited to their kind. On the other, they feature in our own imaginings, as symbols and actors in a script devised by us. Sometimes (as above) we attribute to them the vices that we most regret in ourselves, and interpret those vices as regressions to an imagined bestiality.

It is because of our kinship with the flesh that those of us who incline toward it become like wolves, faithless and treacherous and hurtful; and others like lions, wild and savage and untamed; but most of us become like foxes, that is to say, rascals of the animal kingdom. For what else is a slanderous and malicious man but a fox, or something even more rascally and degraded? Take heed, therefore, and beware that you become not one of these rascally creatures.

(Epictetus *Discourses* I.3.7ff.)

Any serious attempt to see what wolves, lions or foxes are actually like requires that we put these images aside—which is one good reason for following the ascetic discipline of behavioural science, and not impute such vices (or virtues) to those we seek to understand. At the same time we should acknowledge the cultural associations of such animals. Both the biological organisms and the fantasies have a reality outside us, and can perhaps speak to us. Wolves themselves are not faithless, treacherous and hurtful, but there is a “wolfish” nature in us, that we can grasp more easily and perhaps learn to control if we give it an imaginary presence.

Man is a lump where all beasts kneaded bee,
 Wisdom makes him an Arke where all agree;
 The foole, in whom these beasts do live at jarre,
 Is sport to others, and a Theater;
 Nor scapes hee so, but is himself their prey,
 All which was man in him, is eate away

(Donne 1929: 163, “To Sir Edward Herbert” (1610))

Even Stoic philosophers sometimes acknowledged, however inconsistently, that animals could set good examples, whether of syllogistic reasoning or parental love. No doubt they were only acting *as if* they loved or reasoned, and no doubt that the stories that Aesop and others tell about animals are merely allegorical. But behind these allegorizing or inconsistent stories is another myth—that once upon a time we all understood each other (Plato *Statesman* 272a–d). Once upon a time the human tribe was one of many, however exceptional it might have been. But

on that day on which Adam went forth from the Garden . . . was closed the mouth of all beasts, and of cattle, and of birds, and of whatever walks, and of whatever moves, so that they could no longer speak: for they had all spoken one with another with one lip and with one tongue.

(*Book of Jubilees* (c.120 BC) 3.27)

Their mouths were closed, or else our ears. The process by which we became estranged from the rest of creation might have been slower than the Hebrew story suggests, and the memory of Eden could be of a time before the Flood or before the Ice or before the Eruption. Perhaps, for example, it was the Neolithic Agricultural Revolution that brought class-hatred, slavery and war into the world (Wells 2010). Once upon a time, and not all that long ago, hunter-gatherers acknowledged that there were other creatures in the world with just as much “right” to the fruits of the earth. When we began gardening in earnest rabbits and deer and birds became our enemies or our slaves, and not just our occasional rivals!

Some folk stories and deliberate fantasies emphasize that they are Machiavellian enemies, with plots and purposes all their own. The more respectable belief is that they are only inimical unconsciously: they are not real agents, but merely natural obstacles like rocks or rivers. In either case we seem to be at war with creation—and it is only natural that we begin to think our enemies are either themselves evil or its unknowing instruments. But that is at odds with both Greek and Hebrew tradition.

Almost no one in the mainstream European tradition would have doubted that animals were sentient creatures until the eighteenth century. Their sentience was not like ours, no doubt, but the very fact that they were ruled by feelings and desires that we ourselves must learn to harness and control meant that they were, at least so far, much like ourselves. Some Stoic philosophers suggested that, lacking any language in which to express their judgements, they could make no judgements: their “anger,” though it was like enough our own to be used as evidence that those humans who gave in to anger were demeaning their humanity, did not involve a judgement that they had been wronged. What looked like “pride” in them could not include a judgement that their character, or role, or history deserved respect. What looked like “loyalty” or “affection” was only instinctual attachment. Animals do not, strictly, *behave* or *act* at all: they only respond to sensory stimuli in pre-programmed ways, without any awareness that anything is being done, and with no deliberate choice of what seems good. The Stoics’ critics observed that, on the same terms, their seeming to see or smell or hear something would not include a judgement that the thing they sensed, or seemed to sense, was there. To see is not merely to have “visual sensations,” but to have visual evidence of what is seen: evidence that could, in principle, be questioned or rejected. Since “animals” had no rational capacity to make such judgements, or correct them, they could not really be said to see, or smell, or hear. As originally posed, the argument was a *reductio*: what could be more obvious than that animals often see, smell and hear more clearly than we do? And if they do, then either such perceptions don’t require an accompanying judgement, or else animals too can make judgements.

So until the eighteenth century the more usual commonsensical claim was that animals had feelings and emotions much like ours, but that it was up to us to control them (the emotions, and the animals). The more sophisticated view, powered by claims about the involvement of rational judgement even in emotions, was that their “feelings” were very unlike ours, but that they—or at any rate the more familiar vertebrates—were still sentient creatures. René Descartes, and more especially his followers, followed the Stoic argument to its counterintuitive conclusion: animals were not sentient at all. There is no one there behind or within the animal’s mere motions to guide or to explain them. And being wholly insentient they are indeed merely material, and offer no more obstacle to whatever use we please than wood or stone. The older views might reckon that an animal’s goals and interests were always of less importance than the human, and that they—and the emotions we share with them—must be controlled for the sake of goods that only rational beings could see. But at least they should not be made to suffer unduly in our service, and could be respected or admired for what they were. According to the Cartesian myth they were neither “centres of consciousness” nor worth admiring even as beautiful forms: their motions were merely mechanical (Rosenfield 1941).

Theists could still suppose that the mechanisms were at least God’s mechanisms, and that there were better and worse ways of using them: we should use them so as to sustain the life that God had willed for us, not merely to satisfy our desires. Unfortunately, that limitation on our use of them can easily seem “puritanical”: it was a familiar gibe that

those reformers who wished to ban bear-baiting did so not because it gave the bears pain but because it gave the poor pleasure (Macaulay 2010, vol. 1: 126). Mere enjoyment can be made to seem a good, and anyone who wishes, for whatever reason, to restrict it, is easily presented as a kill-joy, and plainly in breach of the principles of a “liberal society.” It is worth adding that John Stuart Mill himself, the principal author of the “harm principle” (that activities should be prohibited only if they bring harm to others, and never because—in the judgement of the law-makers—they corrupt the agents), firmly supported the campaign to prohibit such cruel uses of animals, because they hurt the animals. And this, in turn, allowed the opponents of Mill’s utilitarian principles to suggest that utilitarians themselves must be merely “animal” in their own tastes and pleasures (Mill 1859, vol. 2: 482–5, responding to William Whewell’s criticism of Bentham). Either animals had no feelings (as the Cartesians proposed) or the feelings they had were not worth bothering with (as the older theory had it): to mind about causing animals pain implied that one would oneself fear pain; to mind about frustrating their pleasures implied that one would oneself prefer such pleasures to the joys of human virtue. Bear-baiting and the like could only be condemned by cowards and libertines.

But despite these difficulties, in the early nineteenth century the British Parliament did gradually enact laws against the cruel treatment of animals: inconsistently, and with no clear consensus about the rationale of the welfare legislation, but still with a clear outcome. Parliament lagged behind popular sentiment. It would seem reasonable to have predicted that the challenge of Darwinian Theory might consolidate the sentiment, and further promote legislation. If human and non-human animals are kin, and our sensations, emotions and moral feelings are common stock, as Darwin supposed, what reason can there be to disregard our cousins? In the event, the result was not so benign. Rather than treating the non-human with the respect we owed to the human, some post-Darwinian politicians and experimentalists preferred to treat the human by the same rules we use for the non-human. At the same time, experimentalists especially chose to believe the Cartesian story, and to insist that we should not speculate about, nor consider, the “inner feelings” of animals, which are treated, in this mode, as radically other than “us” (Rollin 1989).

Being in the Image of God

In this context it is understandable that there was religious opposition to Darwinian and post-Darwinian evolutionary theory. As Chesterton remarked:

The sub-conscious popular instinct against Darwinism was . . . that when once one begins to think of man as a shifting and alterable thing, it is always easy for the strong and crafty to twist him into new shapes for all kinds of unnatural purposes. The popular instinct sees in such developments the possibility of backs bowed and hunch-backed for their burden, or limbs twisted for their task. It has a very well-grounded guess that whatever is done swiftly and systematically will mostly be done by a successful class and almost solely in their interests.

(Chesterton 1910: 259)

This has not yet happened, but Chesterton was right to be concerned: Eugenicists sought to eliminate whatever human types they disliked, and employed imprisonment, forced sterilization or castration, and—eventually—murder, in the pursuit of their goal, following in this the time-honoured practices we have employed on “animals” (Black

2003). One response would have been to change our attitude to the non-human. The more familiar response has been to insist that the human demands a unique respect. Chesterton again: "Cruelty to animals is cruelty and a vile thing; but cruelty to a man is not cruelty, it is treason. Tyranny over a man is not tyranny, it is rebellion, for man is royal" (Chesterton 1906: 197; see also 1908: 215).

This respect does not depend on recognizing that human beings are "persons." Persons are self-aware, language-using agents, capable of recognizing their own responsibilities, and bargaining with others to achieve their own, or some common, goal. But not all human beings are persons, and none of us are thus "personal" throughout our lives: we were all once infants, and many of us might end up senile. Some moralists have concluded that such sub-personal human beings either have no "rights" or have them only by courtesy. As individuals we only acquire the rights and responsibilities of personhood by degrees, and may also lose them. And there might be, or might in the past have been, many creatures not of our species who nonetheless have "personal characteristics." This latter discovery might, as above, incline us to respect some of the non-human, but it is also, as above, just as likely to give us an excuse for disregarding the interests and wishes of all those we think are less than fully "persons" (whether these are infants, imbeciles, savages, or not-quite-human hominids). It is better to recognize the lives of others in a way that transcends the merely verbal. John Paul, in *Evangelium Vitae*, makes the point, in rebuking

the mentality which tends to equate personal dignity with the capacity for verbal and explicit, or at least perceptible, communication. It is clear that on the basis of these presuppositions there is no place in the world for anyone who, like the unborn or the dying, is a weak element in the social structure, or for anyone who appears completely at the mercy of others and radically dependent on them, and can only communicate through the silent language of a profound sharing of affection.

(John Paul II 1995: §19)

John Paul intended only to awaken concern for other *human* beings, but the same connections can be made with many of the non-human. Pagan philosophical theology was assured that it was through our "reason" that we were to be united with the gods. Stoic philosophers concluded that it could only be "the wise" who were God's friends, and that the rest of us, being variously stupid, over-emotional and greedy, could only, at best, be useful for God's purposes, without sharing in His goals. The claim of Genesis, on the other hand, was that humanity was made "in God's image," to name, govern and guide the other creatures of His creation. It must be a matter of faith that everyone born of woman retains that image, whether or not they can talk or take responsibility, not because they look like God (who has no body, passions or parts) but merely because they were made to remind each other of the divine.

But of course there are other creatures in the world that also serve to remind us of the divine, other creatures whose powers and appearances may serve as metaphors.

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!

(Matthew 23.37; cf. Luke 13.34)

Are these not images of God as well, and deserving the same respect? Maybe they are even rather *better* images, for us, precisely because we will not imagine that God has a beak or claws. So Ps-Dionysius, explaining why angels are better represented by animal forms than by human, and God by deliberately inappropriate speech:

Accordingly this mode of description in the holy writings honours, rather than dishonours, the Holy and Celestial Orders by revealing them in unlike images, manifesting through these their supernal excellence, far beyond all mundane things. Nor, I suppose, will any reasonable man deny that discordant figures uplift the mind more than do the harmonious, for in dwelling upon the nobler images, it is probable that we might fall into the error of supposing that the Celestial Intelligences are some kind of golden beings, or shining men flashing like lightning, fair to behold, or clad in glittering apparel, raying forth harmless fire, or with such other similar forms as are assigned by theology to the Celestial Intelligences. But lest this thing befall those whose mind has conceived nothing higher than the wonders of visible beauty, the wisdom of the venerable theologians, which has power to lead us to the heights, reverently descends to the level of the inharmonious dissimilarities, not allowing our irrational nature to remain attached to those unseemly images, but arousing the upward-turning part of the soul, and stimulating it through the ugliness of the images; since it would seem neither right nor true, even to those who cling to earthly things, that such low forms could resemble those supercelestial and divine contemplations. Moreover, it must be borne in mind that no single existing thing is entirely deprived of participation in the Beautiful, for, as the true Word says, all things are very beautiful.

(Ps-Dionysius 1949: 33)

So every creature participates in Being and in the Beautiful, and it is the seemingly ugly and incongruous images that might serve us better than the superficially impressive. Might we not conclude that we should be guided by this thought not only in our choice of “religious imagery” but in our lives? Plotinus followed popular opinion in supposing that, were Zeus to make himself visible, he would look like the statue of Zeus that Pheidias made (Plotinus *Ennead* V.8 [31].1, 38–41; see Watson 1988: 59–95). Christians especially are supposed to find the complete image of God in the crucified Christ. “There was no beauty in him that we should desire him” (Isaiah 53.2). Jews and Muslims, in rejecting every image, clearly cannot idolize the human. And Hindu theists acknowledge many incarnations of the divine, as fish, turtle and boar, as well as Krishna and Gautama Buddha. Everything that is manifests something of the creator, and it is in the smallest and meanest of things (as we at first suppose) that we can be reminded of the beauty that makes them. “All the creatures that crawl on the earth and those that fly with their wings are communities like yourselves. We have missed nothing out of the Record—in the end they will be gathered to their Lord” (Koran 2004: 6.38).

But if everything that exists is an image of the divine, and to be respected as such, will this inevitably seduce us into error unless we somehow privilege the *human* form? It is one thing to appreciate all living beauty, and even to learn lessons from the non-human, but we, being human, need to practise being human, rather than model ourselves entirely as mammals, vertebrates or multicellular eukaryotes. This was the moral of the Stoic suggestion that we should “follow nature”—meaning by that that we should

follow *human* nature, and not do all and only what just any animal would do. According to Chesterton, humans and turkeys—for example—are “ships that pass in the night,” whose interests and ideas are entirely opaque to each other. “A turkey is more occult and awful than all the angels and archangels” (Chesterton 1908: 220). And this is why he is critical of “humanitarians” who would wish to deny the human poor their gastronomic pleasures:

It is not a human thing, it is not a humane thing, when you see a poor woman staring hungrily at a bloater [a smoked herring], to think, not of the obvious feelings of the woman, but of the unimaginable feelings of the deceased bloater. . . . The anti-Christmas humanitarian, in seeking to have a sympathy with a turkey which no man can have with a turkey, loses the sympathy he already has with the happiness of millions of the poor.

(Chesterton 1908: 216)

What God intends for turkeys, herrings and all the rest is not our affair: though humanity is not the *only* image of God, yet it is our image, the one relevant to our concerns and hopes—and duties. Those duties, it should not need saying, include the duties of compassion and respect even for those other of God’s creation. Human beings may be made in the image of God, whether they are Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, stupid or clever, young, old or mentally disabled. This claim does distance the Abrahamic tradition from other theistic traditions, Classical or Hindu. Those latter may simultaneously single out some particular class of humanity, Brahmin or philosopher, as closer to the divine, and also acknowledge that we are all mammals, vertebrates and multicellular eukaryotes, having nothing but what God allows us. But even if (or especially if) it is as human beings that we are “in God’s image,” we blaspheme that image by despising what God has made. And we might recall that God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, the weak to confound the mighty (Paul, I Corinthians 1.27).

The Justice of God

Part of what it is to “believe in God” is to believe that the wolf will one day lie down with the sheep, and that justice will be done. Conversely, *not* believing in God is to despair of any final consummation where all wrongs are righted and all good things enjoyed. In a merely “natural” universe, inhabited solely by the products of neo-Darwinian evolution, we can have no reasonable expectation of that resolution. This is not to say that nature is always “red in tooth and claw” (Alfred Tennyson 1850, “In Memoriam,” canto 56), or that there is no chance of peaceful collaboration. On the contrary, all living creatures depend on collaboration (see Margulis and Sagan 1987). But we cannot guarantee that the good of mosquitoes or of tsetse flies will be compatible with the good of cattle, or of people. Nor should we forget the historical and pre-historical injustices that have given us—readers of this volume—such wealth and health and hope of progress. As George Orwell wrote in an essay on Rudyard Kipling: “We all live by robbing Asiatic coolies, and those of us who are ‘enlightened’ all maintain that those coolies ought to be set free; but our standard of living, and hence our ‘enlightenment,’ demands that the robbery shall continue” (Orwell 2000: 206). The debt is wider still: “our civilization is founded on the shambles” (James 2008: 125).

Recent moral theologians have tended either to ignore the long tradition that expects God's Judgement or to replace it with more naturalistic expectations of environmental disaster. Environmentalists, whether secular or religious in their motivation, have not always cared about individual animals, rather preferring to value species, genera or ecosystems. More traditional moralists have suspected them of totalitarian ambitions, and insisted on the privileged status of human beings, conceived as autonomous agents or prospective citizens of eternity. Perhaps we should pause to remember the older apocalyptic stories, and the "four living creatures" who stand before the throne of the Lamb to remind Him of the evils suffered in creation (see Revelation 4.6–9, 5.13–14). It would be wrong to *hope* that Nature or Gaia or the Lord will sweep the earth clean of humankind: but it is not wholly clear that the rest of the earth would much lament our passing. As above, "the pines themselves and the cedars of Lebanon exult over you: since you have been laid low, they say, no man comes up to fell us" (Isaiah 14.7f.).

But if theism is, in part, a belief that justice will eventually be done, and if that justice must include consideration of all the nations of the earth, human and non-human, what are we to say of past injustices? Until recently, theologians could reasonably suppose that the evils of the created world were of relatively recent date, and stemmed from the fall of Adam. They were also mostly persuaded that non-human beings, though they were God's creatures, were too dumb to suffer much. Modern theologians mostly agree that there was biological life many millions of years before human beings had any chance to sin. Why would a God of Justice (let alone of Love) permit or encourage the agonies of evolutionary change? The more popular answer amongst modernists has been that this was necessary for the creation of such autonomous agents as ourselves: predators, parasites, diseases, meteor strikes and mass extinctions are all, somehow, the best available route to Us—so that's all right (Hick 2010; Southgate 2008). Understandably, those who make use of this theodicy must also persuade themselves that non-human beings do not matter—even though the Creator has made far more of them than of us! Luckily, if they do not matter then neither does our treatment of them matter (and we can take comfort that we will not after all be held responsible for the creatures that God has put into our hands).

This seems implausible. Our predecessors were, perhaps, wiser in supposing that this was a fallen world long before Adam fell, and that God hates nothing that He has made, however far it has fallen. All the manifold forms of beauty are at odds here-now. All have been corrupted from their birth. All of them are intended for eternity. We might fantasize that we human beings are closer to God than any other creature, and that the world's evils are justified by our presence in it. The truth is probably quite different. Even Christians, who believe that humanity has been taken up into the Godhead, through the Incarnation of the Word, and that this conjunction was always the point of creation, should recall that even a single human body contains many millions of other creatures, and requires the external support of millions more. The resurrection and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth was also the resurrection and ascension of a biological microcosm, the first fruits of a sleeping world, the promise of a new heaven and a new earth. If that claim is to be anything but sentimental rhetoric we had better acknowledge our present consanguinity with the creatures that God has made, and our error in despising them.

Related Topics

Chapter 17: Evolution; Chapter 25: Moral Inquiry; Chapter 28: Arguments from Evil;
Chapter 39: Bioethics; Chapter 41: Environment

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41

ENVIRONMENT

Holmes Rolston, III

An ancient concern of theists is what account to give of nature, creation. A recent concern is the extent to which nature has been and continues to be jeopardized, in terms of land health and biodiversity, by human development. Today there are, prominently on the scene, ecotheologians who address both of these concerns with a theology of ecology, or creation care, or a stewardship ethic, or Earth spirituality.

Ecology and Human(e) Ecology

Ecology is a natural science. Theism is a religious conviction. How do the two relate in forming worldviews, especially as these inform lifestyles and shape advocacy? By some accounts, religion and science have to be carefully delineated, each in its own domain. One makes a mistake to ask about technical ecology in the Bible (such as the Lotka-Volterra equations, dealing with population size and carrying capacity). There is no more a Christian ecology than there is a Jewish ecology, a Muslim ecology, or a Buddhist chemistry. Keep the two in separate spheres, like law and poetry.

No, others argue, their total separation is too simple. Ecology is a science at native range. Residents on landscapes live immersed in their local ecology. At the pragmatic ranges of sower who sows, waits for the seed to grow, and reaps the harvest, the Hebrews knew their landscape. Abraham and Lot, and later Jacob and Esau, dispersed their flocks and herds because “the land could not support both of them dwelling together” (Genesis 13.2–13; 36.6–8). These nomads were exceeding the carrying capacity, ecologists now say. They knew enough to let land lie fallow in the seventh year, for its regeneration.

Still, despite such local knowledge found incidentally in the Bible, monotheists might continue, there are much deeper value issues: wisdom about God and God’s will for human life, which is in another domain from ecological knowledge, either the folk ecology of the Bible or the advanced ecology of contemporary science. Ecologists might be able to tell us what our options are, what will work and what will not, what is the minimum baseline health of the landscapes we inhabit. But there is nothing in ecology per se that gives ecologists any authority or skills at making more inclusive environmental policy decisions: how much land to keep wild, how much to reserve for agriculture, how much to keep as working landscapes, how much to develop. How much biodiversity ought we to save, especially if this limits human economic development? Theists might claim that their faith urges both enjoying the abundant gifts of the Earth and saving this creation, with some criteria for judgments (Rolston 1996, 2010).

Ethical monotheists might claim that neither technological development, nor conservation, nor a sustainable biosphere, nor sustainable development, nor any other

harmony between humans and nature can be gained until persons learn to use the Earth both justly and charitably. Those twin concepts are not found either in wild nature or in any science that studies nature. They must be grounded in some ethical authority, and this has traditionally been religious, perhaps also philosophical or humanistic. One has to cross a gap to connect facts discovered in Earth sciences with values that humans place on nature when setting environmental policy.

One needs human ecology, humane ecology, and this requires insight more into human nature than into wild nature. True, humans cannot know the right way to act if they are ignorant of the causal outcomes in the natural systems they modify. But there must be more.

Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do [these commandments] that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey.

(Deuteronomy 6.3)

It is not the land husbandry, the science, but the ethics into which the biblical seers have insight. The deeper claim is that there can be no intelligent human ecology unless people learn to use land justly and charitably. Lands do not flow with milk and honey for all unless and until “justice rolls down like waters” (Amos 5.24).

Land of Promise/Promised Earth

Loving the land is a central theme of the Hebrew Bible. Biblical faith is, from the start, a landed faith. Israel is given its “promised land,” “a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3.8; Deuteronomy 27.3). The land is watched over by God’s care:

The land which you are going over to possess is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water by the rain from heaven, a land which the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year.

(Deuteronomy 11.11–12)

The Lord owns the land: “The land is mine” (Leviticus 25.23) and bestows tenure and usufruct (that is, the legal right to use and profit from property that belongs to another) on Israel—their promised land.

Walter Brueggemann takes “land as a prism for biblical faith,” claiming that “[l]and is a central, if not *the central theme* of biblical faith” (Brueggemann 1977: 3). “The land” is both geographical and symbolic. Yearning for a sense of place is a perennial human longing, of belonging to a community emplaced on a landscape; and Israel’s sense of living on a land given by God, of human placement on the Earth, can yet speak to the landlessness, and lostness, of modern persons. All peoples need a sense of “my country,” of their social communities in place on a sustaining landscape they possess in care and in love.

Land is the arable land on which plants can grow and animals can graze (Hebrew: *’adamah*). Land is the terrestrial Earth, brought forth on the third day of creation (Hebrew: *’eres*). Israel’s promised land is its corner of a larger garden Earth on which humankind (symbolized in Adam and Eve) have been placed, in primordial time. Words

translated as “wilderness” occur nearly 300 times in the Bible: uninhabited land where humans are nomads (*midbar*), where animals can be grazed, and wild animals live, or steppe (*’arabah*). Such wilderness is not infrequently the scene of encounter with God, memorably in Jesus’ experience (Mark 1).

Both Judaism and Christianity, emerging from Judaism, became more universalist and less land-based. In the Diaspora, the Jews were a people without a country; and, though this was widely regarded as tragic, Judaism remains a faith that transcends residence in Palestine. Christianity has often been regarded as more spiritual and less material, more universal and less provincial than its parental Judaism. Both these movements out of a geographically particular promised land, which are sometimes thought to make the land irrelevant to faith, can as well make every people residents of a divinely given landscape. In that sense, these faiths might have been mistaken, when they became uprooted from encounters with the land. Rather, Christians and Jews ought to have re-rooted in whatever the landscapes of their residence. In this sense, the Jewish vision of a promised land is inclusive, not exclusive.

For example, the American landscape with its majestic purple mountains, fruited plains, its fauna and flora from sea to shining sea, is divinely created, no less than Canaan from the Negev to Mount Hermon. John Muir, recalling the Psalmist, sings: “The forests of America, however slighted by man, must have been a great delight to God; for they were the best he ever planted” (Muir 1901: 331). And landscapes around the globe, east and west, north and south, on six continents (though not the seventh) have provided homelands that peoples can come to cherish and on which they can flourish.

Ancient Palestine was a promised land. Today and for the century hence, ecotheologians now call for peoples globally to see Earth as a planet with promise, destined for abundant life. When Earth’s most complex product, *Homo sapiens*, becomes intelligent enough to reflect over this earthy wonderland, nobody has much doubt that this is a precious place. Even Edward O. Wilson, a secular humanist, ever insistent that he can find no divinity in, with, or under nature, still exclaims: “The biospheric membrane that covers the Earth, and you and me, . . . is the miracle we have been given” (Wilson 2002: 21).

Viewing Earthrise from the moon, the astronaut Edgar Mitchell, was entranced:

Suddenly from behind the rim of the moon, in long, slow-motion moments of immense majesty, there emerges a sparkling blue and white jewel, a light, delicate sky-blue sphere laced with slowly swirling veils of white, rising gradually like a small pearl in a thick sea of black mystery. It takes more than a moment to fully realize this is Earth . . . home.

(Mitchell quoted in Kelley 1988, at photographs 42–5)

Mitchell continued, “My view of our planet was a glimpse of divinity” (ibid.). The astronaut Michael Collins recalled being earthstruck: “Earth is to be treasured and nurtured, something precious that *must* endure” (Collins 1980: 6).

The land of promise is this planet with promise.

Dominion of Man

“The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till and keep it” (Genesis 2.15). By this account humans are an “Earth-gardener.” Humans domesticate Earth. Earth is the scene of creative wildness, but wild Earth needs to be tamed, made

into a garden or park by cultivation. Although paternalism is today rather suspect, the original context of “dominion” (in medieval Europe) was closely related to “*dominus*,” the Latin for Father. Humans are an Earth Father. Islam has a similar concept: “I am setting on the earth a vice-regent (*khalifah*)” (Sura 2.30) (see Nasr 1968).

The Hebrews had three different kinds of rulers: prophets, priests, and kings—roles unavailable to non-humans. Humans should speak for God in natural history, should reverence the sacred on Earth, and should rule creation in freedom and in love. Human “responsibility” on Earth is as good a word as human “dominion” over Earth, indeed a better one, for it captures what dominion originally meant in the famous Genesis charge to Adam and Eve, or what it ought to mean: a stewardship over something entrusted into one’s care, the prolific Earth with its hordes of creatures brought forth and found to be very good. Some argue that the concept of Earth-gardener needs also to be interpreted as Earth-trustee. A steward manages for the benefit of an owner; a trustee cares for that under his or her care.

There is concern about proper cares from the first chapter of Genesis. God says to the couple: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion” (Genesis 1.27–28). This seems to teach that the role of humans on Earth is to conquer it. That is what humans should care about: ruling over Earth. Famously, historian Lynn White laid much of the blame for the ecological crisis on the Christian belief that humans had dominion over nature, an attack published in *Science* (White 1967). According to White, God’s command for humans to “have dominion” flowered in medieval Europe, licensed the exploitation of nature, and produced science and technology to satisfy human cares, and this has resulted in an ecological crisis. So the biblical teaching launches an arrogantly misplaced care on Earth.

Theologians have replied that appropriate dominion requires caring for creation (Berry 2006; Birch et al. (eds) 1990; Cobb 1972; Skillen and Lugo 1998; Nash 1991). True, there is a sense of dominion that means “Earth-tyrant,” humans subduing nature in a repressive sense, as a conqueror does his enemy. But there are more positive senses. Even keeping the military metaphor, an “Earth-commander” finds the interests of the commander and the commanded inseparably entwined, like a general and his infantry. There is a salutary biblical view of the just king (Psalm 72), to be contrasted with its opposite, the king who rules with force and harshness (Ezekiel 34.4). Sometimes one encounters the metaphor of a pilot of spaceship Earth.

Theologians were also quick to respond that there were two thousand years between the origins of such belief and these results. Other biblical passages, in Psalms and Job, celebrated creation. Even White noticed that Eastern Orthodox Christianity did not develop such dominion attitudes, nor did St Francis within Western Christianity. Greek convictions were important: “Man is the measure of things” (Protagoras). Other factors played more immediate roles: the rise of capitalism, economies of growth, increasing populations, the rise of democracies, increasing secularization. Liberal capitalist democracy arouses escalating aspirations in its citizen-consumers; by contrast Jesus hardly recommended maximizing consumption.

Yes, Israel was a landed faith, some Christian respondents will concede. But that was Old Testament, not New Testament. Christianity is not a landed faith. Indeed, Christianity is not a worldly faith. Does not Jesus say: “My kingship is not of this world” (John 18.36)? Jesus taught that he is taking his disciples to heaven—a father’s house with many mansions. Jesus was taken up into heaven, and at death we leave Earth and go there to be with him.

Jesus did say that his was no worldly kingship. But understanding context is essential. Teaching as he did in the Imperial Roman world, his reference in “this” is to the fallen world of the culture he came to redeem, to false trust in politics and economics, in armies and kings. In the landscape surrounding him Jesus found ample evidence of the presence of God. The birds of the air neither sow nor reap yet are fed by the heavenly Father, who notices the sparrows that fall. Not even Solomon is arrayed with the glory of the lilies, though the grass of the field, today alive, perishes tomorrow (Matthew 6). There is in every seed and root a promise. Sowers sow, the seed grows secretly, and sowers return to reap their harvests. God sends rain on the just and unjust. Jesus teaches that the power organically manifest in the wild flowers of the field is continuous with the power spiritually manifest in the kingdom he announces. There is an ontological bond between nature and spirit. This also seems to be connecting the good land, the rural landscape, with deeper natural powers, present also in wild nature.

By classical theist accounts, after the fall and disruption of the garden, nature too is corrupted and life becomes a struggle. Nature needs to be redeemed by human labor. Here theology, science, economics, and morality all joined to think that increasing development, relieving disease and poverty, is a good thing. But the same Genesis stories teach the human fall into sin. Humans covet, worship false gods; they corrupt their faiths, they rationalize in self-deception. Faiths must be ever-reforming; humans need their prophets and priests to constrain their kings. The righteous, humane life balances all three dimensions. Christians have indeed often been too anthropocentric. The need for repentance is perennial (Rasmussen 1996). Dominion on Earth is human destiny, but a fragile destiny. White’s article forced serious misgivings about the human dominion of classical and enlightenment Judaism and Christianity.

Biodiversity: Genesis and Genetics

Right at the beginning of the Bible, at the creation, God is interested in Sun, Moon, stars, birds, fish, and animals—before humans are even on Earth. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters” (Genesis 1.1). This Wind of God inspires the animated Earth, and “the earth produces of itself” (Mark 4.28; Greek: “automatically”). The days of creation are a series of divine imperatives, not so much fiats as commissions: “Let the earth put forth vegetation.” “Let the earth bring forth living things according to their kinds” (Genesis 1.11, 24). Biblical faith has the conviction that species originate in God’s wish. God ordered Earth to “bring forth swarms of living creatures” (Genesis 1.20). “Swarms” is the English equivalent of the Hebrew word for biodiversity!

Yes, the apex of the creation is man and woman, made of mud, made in the image of God, incarnate and set on their garden Earth. But the world is a habitat also for the myriad creatures—from “great sea monsters” to “birds,” “beasts,” and “creeping things”—which, repeatedly, God finds “good” and bids them to “be fruitful and multiply and fill” the waters, the earth, and the skies (Genesis 1.20–22). That includes the creepy things, and here we might consider the biologist J. B. S. Haldane’s famous remark, when asked by theologians what he had learned about the Creator from studying creation in biology, that God had “an inordinate fondness for beetles” (recalled in Hutchinson 1959).

The fauna is included within the Hebrew covenant. The covenant renewed in the

days of Noah—after a natural disaster with divine provision for saving the wild creatures—is quite specific about this:

Behold I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you.

(Genesis 9.5)

God said, "This is the sign of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I set my bow in the cloud and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth."

(Genesis 9.12–13)

"Keep them alive with you" (Genesis 6.19). That certainly sounds like God loves wild nature. To use modern terms, the covenant was both ecumenical and ecological. In theocratic Israel, animals belonged to God, as indeed did all property. "For every beast of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the air, and all that moves in the field is mine" (Psalm 50.10–11). That includes quite a menagerie. In wilderness desert are "fiery serpents and scorpions" (Deuteronomy 8.15; Numbers 21.6), "jackals," "hyenas," "owls," "kites," "ravens," "porcupines," "ostriches," "wild goats (satyrs)," and "wild beasts" (Isaiah 34). Nor does God forget the flora: "The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly; the cedars of Lebanon which he planted" (Psalm 104.16).

Absent humans, God is there, positively blessing such lands:

Who has cleft a channel for the torrents of rain, and a way for the thunderbolt, to bring rain on a land where no man is, on the desert in which there is no man; to satisfy the waste and desolate land, and to make the ground put forth grass?

(Job 38.25–7)

Thou crownest the year with thy bounty; the tracks of thy chariot drip with fatness. The pastures of the wilderness drip, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing for joy.

(Psalm 65.11–13).

God not only blesses humans; God blesses the desolate wastes. These fierce landscapes, sometimes supposed to be ungodly places, are godly after all. God does not want all these places subdued and cultivated; rather, God delights in places with no people!

In the Bible wildness is never a bad thing:

Who has let the wild ass go free? Who has loosed the bonds of the swift ass, to whom I have given the steppe for his home, and the salt land for his dwelling place? He scorns the tumult of the city; he hears not the shouts of the driver. He ranges the mountain as his pasture, and he searches after every green thing.

(Job 39.5–8)

This celebrates an ecology, not simply a promised land.

Biologists, too, celebrate wildness on the planet, but at this point some biologists will insist that, although Earth is a kind of wonderland, Darwin and genetics have made it untenable to attach any theological perspectives to evolutionary natural history. Evolution is a secular process without any room for monotheist interventions. At this point theologians might reply that the compatibility of genes and Darwin with a theistic perspective is more complex. Biologists and monotheists agree on the genesis of biodiversity, and on escalating complexity. Where once there were no species on Earth, there are today five to ten million. Prokaryotes dominated the living world more than three billion years ago; there later appeared eukaryotes, with their well-organized nucleus and cytoplasmic organelles. Single-celled eukaryotes evolved into multi-celled plants and animals with highly specialized organ systems. First there were cold-blooded animals at the mercy of climate, later warm-blooded animals with more energetic metabolisms. From small brains emerge large central nervous systems.

Biologists continue to debate "progress" in natural history, as well as whether Darwinism has more than a partial explanation for the rise of biodiversity and biocomplexity. What Darwinian accounts insist upon is that there is survival, and the simple survive (microbes, beetles, grasses) as well as the complex (mammals, birds, fishes). The theoretical biologist, John Maynard Smith, concludes: "There is nothing in neo-Darwinism which enables us to predict a long-term increase in complexity," we need "to put an arrow on evolutionary time" but get no help from evolutionary theory (1972: 89). He adds: "It is in some sense true that evolution has led from the simple to the complex. . . . I do not think that biology has at present anything very profound to say about this" (1972: 98).

If one turns to genetics, one has to admit that genetic mutations are random and dimensions of evolutionary natural history seem accidental. Yet there is more to be said here as well. Those who took physics a century back were taught that there are two fundamental things in the world: matter and energy. Einstein found that matter and energy are different forms of the same thing. Recently many biologists have been insisting that we recognize another metaphysical level: information. That is what is coded in the DNA, a "cybernetic" molecule.

An organism is "informed" about how to make a way through the world, how to cope in its niche. Past achievements are recapitulated in the present, with variations; these results get tested today and then folded into the future. Random mutation figures into a larger generative process; species generate and test new possibilities. The challenge is to get as much versatility coupled with as much stability as is possible. This requires optimizing twin maxima, keeping past knowledge while exploring the nearby search space for better adaptation.

Contemporary geneticists are insisting that to think of this process as "blind" fails to understand what is going on. A more comprehensive perspective interprets plant and animal species as information-processing entities of impressive achievement and adaptive competence. The genes function to conserve life; they also make possible a creative upflow of life struggling through turnover of species and resulting in more diverse and complex forms of life, producing more out of less over millennia.

In what he calls a "21st century view of evolution," James A. Shapiro concludes: "Thus, just as the genome has come to be seen as a highly sophisticated information storage system, its evolution has become a matter of highly sophisticated information processing" (Shapiro 1998: 10 and see 2005). The genome, a reservoir of previously discovered genetic know-how, is both conserving this and constantly generating further

variations (new alleles), tested in the life of the organism (the phenotype). The better adapted (better informed) variants produce more descendants. What is novel on Earth is this explosive power to generate vital information. Monotheists have to accept that this creativity is autopoietic, self-generating (as process monotheists have been insisting for decades). But then the Bible passages cited earlier hardly teach anything different; they say that God bade Earth bring forth of itself these swarms of creatures. Meanwhile the biologists and the monotheists find more complementarity than tension between genesis and genetics.

Monotheists also recall that the Bible can amply celebrate these “red in tooth and claw” dimensions of nature:

Is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars, and spreads his wings toward the south? Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up and makes his nest on high? On the rock he dwells and makes his home in the fastness of the rocky crag. Thence he spies out the prey; his eyes behold it afar. His young ones suck up blood; and where the slain are, there is he. . . . Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it.

(Job 39.26–40.2)

The high mountains are for the wild goats; the rocks are a refuge for the badgers. . . . The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God. . . . O Lord, how manifold are thy works! In wisdom hast thou made them all; the earth is full of thy creatures.

(Psalm 104.18–24)

Those roaring lions and blood-soaked eagles are made in divine wisdom. They kill seeking food from God. The non-human creation is wild, outside the hand of man, outside culture. But it is not outside both divine and biological order. That God is personal as revealed in interhuman cultural relations does not mean that the natural relationship of God to lions and eagles is personal, nor should humans treat wild animals as persons. They are to be treated with appropriate respect for their wildness. The meaning of the words “good” and “divine” is not the same in nature and in culture.

Earth Ethics: Sustainable Development/Biosphere

Both theism and ecology find a dynamic, enduring Earth and face concerns about environmental sustainability. Both encounter a historical dynamism superimposed on recurring stability. Evolutionary natural history finds natural selection operating over incremental variations across enormous time spans, with the fittest selected to survive. This drives perennial change during the course of which species acquire new skills, exploit new niches, and track shifting environments. Natural selection drives changes, but natural selection fails without enough stability in ecosystems to make the mutations selected dependably good for immediate years. Natural systems were often “sustained” in the past for long periods of time.

Critics reject this view which privileges the balance of nature and instead emphasize episodic events, open ecological systems, dynamism and change. Disturbances in the orderly succession of ecosystems produce a patchwork landscape. Ecosystems have various kinds of resilience, but if the disturbances become amplified enough, the

stability gets swamped by disorder. Equilibrium and non-equilibrium do represent two ends of a spectrum with real ecosystems somewhere in between, and whether one sees one or the other can depend on the level and scale of analysis. At population levels, species diversity, or community compositions, ecosystems can show predictable patterns, and approach steady states on restricted ranges. When unusual disturbances come, they can be displaced beyond recovery of their former patterns. Then they settle into new equilibria.

The processes and products originally in place will with high probability have been those for which organisms are naturally selected for their adaptive fits, since misfits go extinct and easily disrupted ecosystems collapse and are replaced by more stable ones. Ecosystems get tested over thousands of years for their resilience. As a result, there is both stability and dynamic novelty. Many general characteristics are repeated; many local details vary. Patterns of growth and development are orderly and predictable enough to make ecological science possible. This ecosystemic nature, once flourishing independently and for millennia continuing along with humans, has in the last one hundred years come under increasing jeopardy—variously described as a threat to ecosystem health, integrity, stability, or quality.

Classical monotheism arose with a more fixed account of Earth structures and processes, set in place at an initial “start-up” creation, and thereafter ongoing with little change. Facing death, as Jacob is “gathered to my people” he blesses Israel: “The blessings of your father are mighty beyond the blessings of the eternal mountains, the bounties of the everlasting hills” (Genesis 49:26). Life is an ongoing struggle, and there arise hopes for final redemption, when the Messiah comes, or, for Christians, comes again. But in the course of Earth history, if Israel keeps the commandments, God says, “then I will let you dwell in this place in the land that I gave of old to your fathers for ever” (Jeremiah 7.7). They hoped that, in their promised land, “it might go well with them and with their children for ever” (Deuteronomy 5.29). That certainly sounds like sustainability.

Life perpetually renewed in the midst of its perpetual perishing is a common theme in both evolutionary natural history and in Christian faith. Both agree that Earth has long sustained and renewed life, although the classical regeneration of new life out of old on the scale of millennia is expanded to that of billions of years in contemporary science. Many scientists believe, even in a sustainability crisis, that nature is forever lingering around. Nature has not ended and never will. Humans depend on nature for their life support. They might upset and degrade natural systems. But the natural forces can and will return—if one takes away the humans. Nature will always have a past and a future.

Other scientists believe that humans on Earth are at a rupture point in history. European-Western civilization is self-destructing, spreading and triggering disruptions around the globe: climate change, biodiversity loss, soil loss, ecosystem upsets. Until now, the technosphere was contained within the biosphere. Hereafter the technosphere will explode these limits. Earth is now in a post-evolutionary phase, a post-ecological phase. The next millennium is the epoch of the “end of nature” (McKibben 1989). The new epoch is the Anthropocene (Creutzen 2006). That puts us, indeed, at a hinge point of history. What ought we to do to ensure sustainability?

Scientists turning to environmental policy often appeal to ecosystem management. This appeals alike to scientists, who see the need for understanding ecosystems objectively and for applied technologies, and also to humanists and theologians who desire benefits for people. The combined ecosystem/management policy promises to operate

at system-wide levels, presumably to manage for indefinite sustainability, alike of ecosystems and their outputs. "Sound scientific management" connects with the idea of nature as "natural resources" and at least permits a "respect nature" dimension, although the question of "manage for what" is typically answered with the presumption of human benefits. Christian ethicists note that the secular word "manage" is a stand-in for the earlier theological word "steward."

Environmental science can inform the evaluation of nature in subtle ways. Scientists describe the *order*, *dynamic stability*, and *diversity* in these biotic communities. They describe *interdependence*, or speak of *health* or *integrity*, perhaps of their *resilience* or *efficiency*. Scientists describe the *adapted fit* that organisms have in their niches. They describe an ecosystem as *flourishing*, as *self-organizing*. Strictly interpreted, these are only descriptive terms; and yet often they are already quasi-evaluative terms. Ecology is rather like medical science, with therapeutic purpose, seeking such flourishing health. Theologians may remark that such terms sound like a secular celebration of the *good earth* described in the Genesis creation parable, or the *promised land* of Israel.

Western religion and Western science have, for centuries, both joined in pushing back limits. Humans have more genius at this than any other species. We have lived with a deep-seated belief that one should hope for abundance, and work toward obtaining it. Christian faith brought "the abundant life"; DuPont championed "better things for better living through chemistry." One accentuates the spiritual, the other the material side of life. Still, science and religion joined to get people fed, sheltered, to keep them healthy, to raise standards of living. Christians seek to get people saved from their sins. Moral persons, following the example of Jesus, will also maximize human satisfactions, at least those that support the good life, which must not just include minimal food, clothing, health, and shelter, but some abundance, more and more goods and services that people want. Such growth is always desirable. Economists call such behavior "rational"; humans will maximize their capacity to exploit their resources. After all, the Bible starts out urging humans to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion."

Theologians and philosophers have built that into the prevailing concept of human rights: a right to self-development, to self-realization. Religious activists and missionaries have fought for that as much as economists and development scientists. But now such thinkers have begun to realize that this egalitarian ethic scales everybody up and drives an unsustainable world. When everybody seeks their own good, aided by applied sciences, there is escalating consumption. When everybody seeks everybody else's good, urged by Gospel compassion, there is, again, escalating consumption. This brings the worry whether either such development science or compassionate ethical monotheism is well equipped to deal with the sorts of global-level problems we now face. Global threats require us to limit growth in the name of sustainability.

The four main concerns on the world agenda for the new millennium are: escalating population, escalating consumption, peace and war, deteriorating environment. Escalating population and consumption are enabled by science, as is the technology for war, and the spillover is a degraded environment. Religions have fostered population growth, or are ambivalent about it, they have enabled human(e) development with increased consumption. As a result, neither population, nor consumption, nor environment is sustainable, on our present headings. A World Council of Churches theme has been "justice, peace, and the integrity of creation," with decreasing effectiveness in that order.

The prime model is sustainability, but if one asks what is to be sustained, there are two foci. The favored answer is: sustainable development. When humans face limits, they need to find growth patterns that can be sustained. Such a duty seems plain and urgent; scientists, developers, social gospel activists and missionaries can be unanimous about it. Sustainable development is useful just because it is a wide angle lens, an orienting concept that is at once directed and encompassing, a coalition-level policy that sets aspirations, thresholds, and allows pluralist strategies for their accomplishment. One needs the best that science can contribute (genetically modified foods, carbon dioxide monitors and models) and the best that religion can contribute (agricultural missions, sermons moderating escalating consumerism).

The underlying conviction is that the trajectory of development is generally right—only the developers, in their enthusiasm, have hitherto failed to recognize environmental constraints. We can be taught how to sustain the environment by scientists, and we will need the motivations of stewardship to succeed. Economists, who also like to think of themselves as scientists, might remark that a “growth economy” is the only economy theoretically or practically desirable, or even possible. They dislike “no-growth economies,” but now accentuate “green economics.”

Still, the worries continue about ongoing development. A massive *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment*, sponsored by the United Nations, involving over 1,300 experts from almost 100 nations, begins: “At the heart of this assessment is a stark warning. Human activity is putting such strain on the natural functions of Earth that the ability of the planet’s ecosystems to sustain future generations can no longer be taken for granted” (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005: 5).

There is another possible focus: “sustainable biosphere.” Some ecologists have insisted that “sustainable” is not so much an economic as an environmental term. The Ecological Society of America claims: “Achieving a sustainable biosphere is the single most important task facing humankind today” (Risser et al. 1991: 625). The fundamental flaw in “sustainable development” is that it sees the Earth as resource only.

The underlying conviction in the sustainable biosphere model is that the current “development” trajectory is generally wrong, because it will inevitably overshoot, fed by the aspirations of those who always seek to push back limits. The environment is not some undesirable, unavoidable set of constraints to be subdued and conquered with clever technological fixes. Rather, nature is the matrix of multiple values; many, even most of them, are not counted in economic transactions. Nature provides numerous other values (life support, biodiversity, a sense of place) that humans wish to sustain. The test of a good Earth is not how much milk and honey can be squeezed out of it to drip into human mouths.

A “sustainable biosphere” model demands that the economy be worked out “within” a quality of life in a quality environment—clean air, water, stable agricultural soils, attractive residential landscapes, forests, mountains, rivers, rural lands, parks, wildlands, wildlife, renewable resources. Decisions about this quality environment will need input from society at large, including its scientists and its Christians, Jews, and peoples of other faiths. Development is desired, and society must learn to live within the carrying capacity of its landscapes. Even more humans need to treasure Earth’s biodiversity, to celebrate creation. Here science and religion complement each other in teaching us how to sustain the home planet, the Earth with promise, the global promised land.

Related Topics

Chapter 17: Evolution; Chapter 40: Animals

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Part IV

THEISM AND CULTURE

42

ARCHITECTURE

David Brown

In what follows I proceed by three stages. The *Introduction* indicates why modern attempts to reduce architecture to a purely practical art appear mistaken. The *Historical Section* then observes how deeply the connections between architecture and theistic belief once ran. While some of these are no longer tenable, the *Contemporary Section* identifies other pertinent questions that have continued to demand philosophical investigation.

Introduction

Architecture has been given considerably less attention in philosophical writing than, for example, either painting or music. There is an obvious reason for this: it is very easy to reduce its significance by treating it as merely one of the applied arts, and so more like furniture-making or music that serves some particular purpose such as military marches or dance music. Ironically, much of twentieth-century architectural theory in effect endorsed such a view with its repeated refrain that form should follow function, a slogan first coined by the American architect, Louis Sullivan (1856–1924); in other words, that practical purpose should wholly determine building style. How far actual practice ever conformed is a moot point, since in so much modern architecture the desire for simple forms was often allowed to override practical functions (Graham 2000); hence the reason why so much modern housing was eventually abandoned. But there were in any case two basic faults with the slogan. The first is that function cannot in fact be so easily divorced from wider human concerns. Thus housing, for example, is unlikely to satisfy unless a much wider raft of interests are taken into account besides adequate space for eating, sleeping and relaxing. Also relevant would be environmental setting (including questions such as view, garden or ambient noise) and ease of access (both directly and in terms of neighboring facilities such as shopping and entertainment). Similarly, shops need to take into account not just the ability to display the relevant wares but also such things as security of setting, and even confidence generated in the business by the sense of the building as one that is here to stay.

From the examples just mentioned it is easy to see how questions of function slip almost imperceptibly into aesthetic considerations, and so it will come as no surprise that classical writing on architecture had already broadened the list from simple fulfillment of function to include durability and aesthetic pleasure—the *utilitas*, *firmitas*, and *venustas* of Vitruvius in his *On Architecture* (c.25 BCE). “Utility” or suitability to function needs to be supplemented by a building that is not only sustainable in the long term (*firmitas*) but also gives pleasure (*venustas*) by its visual appearance as much in its

wider context as in itself. However, it should not be thought that only *utilitas* is subject to this sort of criticism. Much the same could be said about Vitruvius' other two criteria. Durability, for example, would seem to be not just about eliminating any possibility that the building will collapse but also a matter of expressing the lasting character and value of the activities that take place within; hence, at least in the past, the durability of banks, churches and schools. Equally, one key element in determining the aesthetic pleasure given by a building is the way in which the building matches its intended function, with signals of transcendence, for example, in the architecture of a church, of care in a hospital, or of security in a prison. As Kant observed, "the beauty of a . . . building (such as a church, palace, armory, or summer house) does presuppose the concept of the purpose that determines what the thing is meant to be, and hence a concept of its perfection" (1987: 76).

With most non-theists willing to acknowledge considerable aesthetic merits in many a religious building, it might be thought that it is, therefore, through beauty that a connection with theism should be sought. But, despite beauty having been treated as one of the traditional divine attributes, beauty in architecture seems seldom to have been sought in its own right in churches or other religious buildings. Its emergence proves more a consequence of the pursuit of certain other values, in particular symbolism. What those values were is discussed in more detail below in relation to Christianity in particular. So here it will be appropriate to make some more general remarks on how the issue affects some other forms of theism. Hindu temples, especially in their south Indian form with their riot of gaudy colors and sensuous imagery, can often seem to the Western observer an exercise in bad taste, but this is to misread what the architecture is intended to convey. The aim is not aesthetic but religious with the structure of the building intended to evoke a divine dwelling (often alluding to a sacred mountain) and the color and imagery awesome expectation as the worshipper approaches the dark mystery of the innermost sanctuary, the *garbha griha* (Stierlin 1998; Champalakalakshmi 2001). The latter point, in particular, is important because the symbolism works quite differently from Western art with the details less significant than the overall impact. By sheer excess the imagery indicates the inadequacy of any particular image and so prepares viewers for their final encounter with an image in the central shrine that is often very worn and sometimes deliberately aniconic as with Shiva's *linga*.

By contrast, those same Westerners who take an instant dislike to Hindu temples might well be found giving unqualified praise to the mosques of a city such as Isfahan (in Iran) in which color, geometry and calligraphy seem to combine to produce works of exquisite artistry. Yet here also it is all too easy to draw the wrong conclusion. The fact that of all versions of theism Islam lays the most stress on divine transcendence should make one hesitate over artistry per se as the aim. In fact, the usual intention was to provide worshippers with further signals of transcendence. Calligraphy provided an obvious reminder of the Qur'an as divine speech and as such its primary intention was not necessarily that it should be read (Frishman and Khan 1994: 44–5; though for a different view, Necipoglu 2005: 106). Again, the perfection of the geometry in the way in which it is built up from simple patterns has sometimes been seen as a deliberate attempt to reflect the perfection of the world as a divine creation (Critchlow 1976), while others stress more an invitation to go beyond the instability of creation to contemplation of the absolute character of the divine will (Clévenot 2000). No doubt the emphasis varied, depending on which feature of the building one focuses on. For instance, the way in which *muqarnas* or stalactites hang from the dome of the

mosque give the impression of a lightness and insubstantiality that it would not otherwise have. Although both approaches imply the subordination of beauty to other considerations, this is not to deny exceptions. This probably holds for some of the major mosques built in the twentieth century where questions of national pride also played an important role, for example, with the King Hassan II Mosque, Casablanca (Serageldin 1996: 96–7; Holod and Khan 1997: 55–61). Again, until after World War II Judaism usually imitated contemporary Christian styles (Meek 1995; Jarrassé 2001). So it seems quite likely that synagogue construction was based on aesthetic considerations rather than on any of the symbolic arguments that were engaging Christians at the time.

Such considerations suggest that, though it is possible to pursue connections between theism and architecture through questions of beauty, their interrelation with issues of symbolism cannot be ignored. Indeed, the way in which the symbolic vocabulary of the different major religions varies could be used to explore the question of whether it is a case of different symbolic systems generating different standards of beauty or of the same standard applying throughout but training being required to perceive how exactly this operates across different visual languages.

Historical Section

Here I want to provide a much broader context for such symbolic considerations before eventually focusing more narrowly on Christianity. Admittedly, it is possible to analyze religious buildings of the past purely in terms of their social and ritual significance (see, for example, Jones 2000), but no sharp distinction would once have been drawn between the “sacred” and the “secular.” Divine creation was itself viewed as a form of architecture that delimited different areas for one purpose or another (“secular” no less than “sacred”), while it also provided specific patterns to be imitated. It is perhaps those modern writers on architecture who speak of walls as boundaries that best capture this former view (for example, Alexander 1979). Although only modern Hinduism strongly retains the notion of the home as sacred with an internal shrine always present, such attitudes were once universal, and reflected the view that the divine demarcated an appropriate place for the home no less than for the temple (Brown 2004: 170–89). It was, therefore, more a matter of degrees of sacredness rather than any absolute opposition.

So in noting that the Jerusalem Temple was built under divine instruction (I Kings 6–7), it is important to note that it was seen as culminating at the center of a series of boundaries (the world, the Holy Land, the holy city), each with specific purposes, and was even identified with both the original locus of creation and the Garden of Eden. It is perhaps, therefore, not altogether surprising that later Christianity not only continued to treat Jerusalem as the world’s center (for instance, in its maps) but also frequently claimed that its churches were built in imitation of the Temple. In practice, however, there was so much confusion about the Temple’s precise form until modern times that in effect almost any style could be claimed as having the building as its inspiration, and was (Hamblin and Seely 2007). Thus, while it was a plausible assumption that the proportions between nave and chancel in Gothic churches matched those between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies in the original, identification of the seventh-century Dome of the Rock as the Temple’s continuation was well wide of the mark, as was Raphael’s deduction of a Classical form in his painting of *The Marriage of the Virgin* (1504), or of Baroque parallels in the eighteenth-century Karlskirche in Vienna with its twin external pillars seen as imitating the strangely named Boaz and Jachin (I Kings 7:21)

in the original. Yet, the very fact that the claim was made demonstrates the continuing desire to see architecture as modeled on a divine original.

Of much greater significance for architecture generally, though, was the supposition that the divine creation of the world was itself like the construction of a building. All ancient cultures presupposed that in the process of creation the Creator had assigned different land areas for different forms of human activity, with some seen as most appropriate for human dwelling and cultivation, and others (such as forest groves or mountains) as places for divine encounter where heaven and earth might be more easily bridged. So, just as the Garden of Eden is presented as a defined area for Adam and Eve to dwell in (Genesis 2:8, 3:24), townships continued to be marked out formally by religious ceremonies, as in the Roman ceremony of the *pomerium* or boundary (Brown 2004: 172–3). Equally, the way in which the land itself originally had the significance later assigned to the building placed on it is to be observed not just in the original meaning of *templum* as any marked area deemed suitable for consulting the gods but also, even to this day, in the same residual notion within Islam, according to which any area whatsoever marked in the sand or soil can function as a mosque, provided it is appropriately directed toward Mecca. Similarly, the Sanskrit word *vimana* means well-measured, a reflection of the way in which within Hinduism the temple building was (and is) required throughout to model cosmology (Lyle 1992).

It would be very easy to relegate such ideas entirely to the past, but it is worth observing that town planning and the creation of National Parks marks the re-establishment of such notions of appropriate boundaries, and so it is possible for the theist to view modern zoning practices as, in fact, a return to some fundamental theistic principles. Although to many readers the last sentence might seem like a rather desperate attempt to establish the relevance of theistic considerations, the connection of parks and gardens with both theism and architecture is, in fact, long-standing. Taking the latter first, as with the Persian word “Paradise,” “garden” in all European languages means an enclosure, and so has that boundary character that we suggested was so basic to early ideas of architecture (Hunt 2000: 19–20). If for the most part gardening and architecture are now treated quite separately, even today the connection is sometimes acknowledged as in the decision to expand the fifth edition of *The Penguin Dictionary of Architecture* to include *and Landscape Architecture* (1998).

Once, no less central was the connection with theism. The way in which the four quadrants of some Muslim gardens were intended to recall the rivers of Paradise is well known (Ruggles 2008). Christianity, too, has had a long history of involvement in garden symbolism. So extensive was the application of symbolism in the medieval garden that it has been described as “a kind of surrogate Bible” (Prest 1981: 23–4). Discussion continued well into more modern times. Formal Renaissance knot gardens were premised on the assumption that fallen nature needed restoration; whereas landscape and picturesque gardens were much more optimistic about where God could be perceived (Pizzoni 1999; McIntosh 2005). Not that religion was by any means the only factor in such discussions, but the way in which such types of argument might continue to be of relevance can be seen in modern debates about preserving wilderness. Is God, it may be asked, most easily experienced in places untouched by human hand, or can that same human hand (whether in garden or in building) facilitate such possibilities? In other words, there is the general question of whether any form of mediation necessarily produces greater distance. Even in the case of human beings, one can sometimes learn more about them through their family or friends than by encountering them directly, for

example if they are shy or reserved. So there seems no reason in principle why the mediated, bounded garden or building could not, after all, make the greater contribution.

But it was not just a matter of observing the right boundaries; human architecture also sought justification in imitation of specific aspects of the divine architecture of the world. Vitruvius had already observed that structures in the Classical style were elaborations of basic patterns already to hand in nature. The greatest theorist of the Renaissance, Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72) carried that idea a stage further. Classicism could appeal to what he saw as “the absolute and fundamental rule of Nature” in *concinntitas* by which he meant harmonic ratios that generated symmetry and proportion (Alberti 1986: 194–200). In the nineteenth century a similar kind of argument was pursued in great detail by John Ruskin (1819–1900), but this time in defense of the revival of the Gothic style. For him not only are “forms . . . not taken from nature . . . ugly,” but “every line and hue is . . . at its best a faded image of God’s daily work” (Ruskin 1989: 105, 147). For this reason, although straight lines are conceded to be essential to human architecture, they must be used only where they are “consistent with the most frequent natural groupings of them that we can discover” (Ruskin 1989: 108).

As Ruskin’s own partial later retreat from such an approach indicates, such ideas are harder to sustain in a post-Darwinian world. Even those who continue to adhere to theistic belief are now less confident of quite so direct a link between the patterns of nature and what God might ultimately intend. But there is also an additional difficulty. The idea of legitimate human activity simply assisting natural processes has come increasingly under strain, as humanity has discovered its potential to go well beyond them. While endorsement of contraception is probably the best-known example of this phenomenon, the issue is equally apparent in the production of buildings through the use of computer-generated plans. Technology now surpasses what even the best human minds could envisage, using only their own natural resources. One of the great ironies of modern architecture is that greater honesty in public exposure of the utilities that help the building to function (consider Renzo’s and Rogers’ Centre Pompidou in Paris, 1977) has also gone with greater concealment of what secures its continuing existence (for example, Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, 1997). Yet it is not just those of conservative or Catholic sympathies that might resist such modern developments. Buildings that give the impression of being about to keel over are hardly conducive to individuals feeling at home in their environment: for an extreme example, consider Massimiliano Fuksas’ Gymnasium Paliano in Italy, 1985. Of course, for the non-believer such objections amount to no more than recognition of human needs as they have been generated by evolution. But the theist could add that, however generated, they still constitute an appeal to nature and thus also, implicitly at least, to the Creator. So perhaps this type of argument from nature is not so much defeated as in need of more complex formulation.

However that may be, there remains one version of such traditional claims to a relation that appears immune to our changing attitudes to nature, and that is the idea that one style of architecture is better at reflecting the divine nature than another. So Classicism could claim that its sense of order best reflects the divine order, Gothic the majesty of the divine in drawing our thoughts heavenwards, or Baroque in stressing the element of exuberance and theatre in divine action. Best known are perhaps the views of Abbot Suger (c.1081–1151), the creator of the abbey of St Denis, then on the outskirts of Paris but now in its suburbs. For him the new use of light in Gothic “illuminates minds so that they go through the true lights to the True Light where Christ is the true door” and so can be translated “by divine grace from an inferior to a higher world” (Suger 1979: 48–9,

65). Nor is it hard to understand the force of his argument. To the typical spire pointing heavenwards is added a building made to look physically as light as possible, not least through the amount of glass used and it seemingly held in position by the slenderest of frames. By contrast, whatever symbolism might once have underpinned the Classical style in antiquity, there is no doubt that with the Renaissance and the Enlightenment the primary intention was to speak of order, including divine order. In the modern world rationalism and religion are so often set in opposition that it is well to remember that this was once the favored style of Protestant churches. What was intended was endorsement neither of Renaissance art nor of Enlightenment critiques of religion but, rather, affirmation of the ordered character of the Christian life and its beliefs, seen most obviously perhaps in the systematic character of Calvin's own theology.

Of all styles, most difficult to comprehend are perhaps the claims of Baroque, in part because it secured no defense by some great theoretician and in part because its attitudes are currently so out of fashion in Church circles. In rough, what it sought to suggest by its architecture was a sense of movement and so of divine involvement in and with the world. So the oval replaced the more static Renaissance circle (as in Bernini's approach to St Peter's), while ornate balconies were used to suggest heavenly observers of the mass as it was performed below as a form of theatre (as in St John Nepomuk in Munich). Further aloft false ceilings (*trompe l'oeil*) implied the dissolution of barriers between heaven and earth, as saints floated upwards and angels downwards (as in the Jesuit church in Rome). All these ideas—whether in Gothic, Classicism or Baroque—might seem to have died a natural death with Modernism, but a few of their architects continued to be willing to make such connections, as with Mies van der Rohe's willingness to trace his ideas on simplicity back to Augustine on divine simplicity. Again, Charles Jencks has argued that postmodernist architecture demonstrates connections both with Baroque and with a religious way of viewing the world (Jencks 1997, 1999).

In the past, all such approaches were usually set in opposition to one another, but there seems no reason in principle why they could not be treated as complementary insights. The greater difficulty is to know how to treat such approaches in a society that is no longer fundamentally theist in attitude. There might seem an obvious answer: to confine such questions to religious buildings. But matters are not quite that simple. Such styles were originally commonly also applied to secular buildings with similar ideas in mind. So with the Classical style, civic order and divine order were seen as closely related, while even the application of Gothic to nineteenth-century railway stations had a religious element, in endowing travel with a high seriousness. Britain's oldest travel firm, Thomas Cook, for example, began in the organization of temperance rail excursions. Perhaps theist and non-theist could unite in seeking the preservation of such buildings on grounds of respect for the past and its skills in craftsmanship, while the theist would continue to detect rather more. Whether non-theists can generate sufficient shared values to allow for such public expression in buildings is an issue to which I return below. In the meantime, it is worth noting that even theists by and large retreated from such notions in the twentieth century, as church buildings for the most part slavishly followed contemporary styles. Here, the issue was not just a matter of following fashion. Two further arguments were repeatedly voiced: first, that a church devoted to service of the community should not be ostentatious in its buildings and, second, that in any case the building must be primarily instrumental or functional, as God could be worshipped anywhere.

The Contemporary Context

These last comments have already trespassed onto the present. There are two further issues worth noting that are more distinctly contemporary.

The first concerns the possibility or otherwise of great architecture in a society not based on theism. For example, Gordon Graham (2007) contends that present secular society lacks the necessary impetus. At first sight, the very question might seem strange since much good architecture continues to be produced in the modern world. But it is noticeable how in seeking to identify such architecture the almost universal response is to appeal to individual buildings and not streets as a whole, or particular districts. In other words, what appeals is individual architectural expressions that often sit ill at ease with neighboring buildings. For example, Daniel Liebeskind's widely praised Jewish Museum in Berlin (1989) succeeds so well because it stands at a distance from any other building, whereas his proposals for the extension to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London were rightly contested, it could be argued, because his proposals would have resulted in a building radically discontinuous with its immediate neighbors.

In considering what more might be required some have argued that it is just a matter of good manners to consider how buildings relate to their neighbors (Edwards 1944). Others have argued for the rooting of architecture in psychological needs, and seen that as a way of securing an alternative objective foundation to religious ideas (Crowe 1995; Weber 1995). But the difficulty is that the postulated "needs" seem hard to sustain as universals, and, in any case, to produce a corporate vision what seems required is something more social than personal. Nor does the rhetoric of "truthfulness" help. Notoriously, in his defense of the revival of Gothic architecture, Augustus Welby Pugin (1812–52) defended Gothic as more honest in exposing its flying buttresses than had been Sir Christopher Wren (1632–1723) in his Baroque cathedral of St Paul's where they had remained concealed (Pugin 2003: 4–5). But, as later with Modernism, that basic principle of honesty was not consistently applied. More importantly, it could not be, because architecture has aims other than such "moral" ideas, whether implying respect for function and a proper use of materials or even the *Zeitgeist* of the time (Watkin 1977).

More recently, in a sustained philosophical discussion that plays off Heidegger against Hegel, Karsten Harries has argued that architecture can indeed embody notions such as "the common good." Picking up on a hint in Augustine's *City of God*, he suggests that Adam went willingly with Eve from the Garden of Eden because "he would rather know Eve, working and facing an inevitable death together with her, than be in Paradise without her" (Harries 1997: 365). From that analogy, he draws the conclusion: "I would like to suggest that such a leave-taking from God for the sake of a genuinely human community is the foundation of any genuinely human dwelling. It is this leave-taking, this fall, this expulsion into insecurity and uncertainty that alone lets us develop into responsible individuals." Indeed, so worried is he by the possibility of "a golden calf" that he is adamant that "interpretations of ideal dwelling must acknowledge that they are finally no more than precarious conjectures" (Harries 1997: 364). But the result is that, while he offers excellent arguments against judging architecture solely on form or function, where his wider political concerns might take us remains underdetermined.

So, arguably, what is still missing without theism is a corporate vision: the church or other public building at its end giving unity to the street as a whole. Concrete alternative corporate visions have, of course, been canvassed in the twentieth century, but it is noticeable how the most determined in Nazism and Stalinism both resulted in

bombastic and essentially derivative architectural styles. However valuable democracy might be politically, aesthetically it seems only to result in individualism, as is perhaps most obvious in contemporary art, though this might well be (and often is) subsidized by the state. Even those who seek to defend a more communitarian approach that makes no appeal to religion but still contains some objective standards (see, for example, Scruton 1979) seem in the end forced to rely on finding those standards in some earlier style, as in Scruton's own support for Classicism.

The other issue is quite different, and is modern only in the sense that it becomes clear as an issue once religious belief has itself come under challenge. This is the question of whether it is possible to distinguish aesthetic and religious experience of a building when both seem to be present. In the atheist's view, the latter is simply a particular aura given to what is essentially an aesthetic experience as a result of prior disposition on the believer's part. In questioning that account some theists would no doubt argue that the religious element, in fact, constitutes a supervenient property on the aesthetic, in much the same way as the attribute "good" functions in relation to non-moral features of our world. Others, however, might prefer a quite different approach, since there seem good grounds for more sharply differentiating the two types of experience. The first consideration is that the quality of the aesthetic experience and that of the religious do not necessarily run in parallel. Almost any spire can evoke in the believer a sense of divine transcendence, whereas typically an aesthetic experience will heavily depend on the scale and quality of the workmanship involved. Then, second, an aesthetic judgment is usually an estimation of a building's visual impact as a whole, whereas the religious need not be. So, for example, the aesthetic evaluation is likely to take account of such things as the nature and quality of the ornament on the building, something unlikely to have a bearing on the religious view which will probably be more narrowly focused. Of course, sometimes overall judgments of beauty will be involved in both cases, but not necessarily; so, for example, one can have a general sense of order without noting any of the details of a building.

Some might be inclined to add a third difference: that the aesthetic experience is intrinsic to what is seen whereas the religious experience is, in fact, constituted by a pointer elsewhere, to how God is understood. But, while this no doubt correctly describes what sometimes happens, on other occasions the two scenarios seem more nearly parallel, in that the divine is apparently encountered in the actual seeing of the relevant feature of the building. At this point even some theists might be tempted to disagree, insisting that it is inappropriate or even meaningless to speak of God being experienced in this way, for what could it mean to encounter an infinite being in this way (for example, Davies 2003)? And yet in reply one might observe that the claim is not that the totality of God is encountered but only divinity under some partial aspect: transcendent, ordered, dynamic and so on.

Related Topics

Chapter 41: Environment; Chapter 43: Aesthetics

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Recommended Reading

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- Clévenot, D. (2000) *Ornament and Decoration in Islamic Architecture*, London: Thames & Hudson. A useful reminder of the extent to which Islamic religious architecture seeks to go beyond the narrowly utilitarian.
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43

AESTHETICS

Mark Wynn

Theists of all traditions have long been interested in the relationship between theism and moral goodness. They have not always paid the same close attention to the relationship between theism and aesthetic goodness. Indeed, it has sometimes been thought that an interest in beauty can be spiritually pernicious, just because it can deflect a person's attention from moral concerns. We are all familiar with the stereotype of the person who is too much interested in "beauty" to notice the pressing needs of their neighbor (Begbie 2006).

At the same time, there are a number of stock themes within the various theisms which readily issue in the thought that God is beautiful or imbued with a glory that is not to be understood in purely ethical terms. When believers talk of standing before God and enjoying God's radiant presence, for example, or when they express their devotion to God in terms of ecstatic delight, they have often been pulled in the direction of an aesthetic idiom. Hence the Psalmist can declare: "One thing I have desired of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord" (Ps 27.4). (The term translated here as "beauty" does not have an exact English counterpart, and it can also signify "favor" and "sweetness" (Sherry 2002: 56–7).) Moreover, theists have commonly supposed that the grandeur of creation offers at least a glimpse into the glory (in Hebrew, *kabod*) and majesty of the God who is the world's source. "O Lord my God, thou art very great", says the Psalmist; "thou art clothed with honour and majesty. Who coverest thyself with light as with a garment: who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain" (Ps 104.1–2; see also Ps 19.1). There is also evidence of a more discursive, inferential approach, where the beauty or majesty of the created order is taken to point towards the beauty of God, insofar as God stands as the source of the beauty of the creation. In the Hebraic tradition, the Book of Wisdom seems to exhibit some such interest, as when it is remarked that "by the greatness and beauty of creatures proportionably the maker of them is seen" (Wisdom 14.5).

Along with these biblical sources, the interest of Judaeo-Christian theism in aesthetic questions, and in the question of divine beauty, owes much of course to its early and lasting exposure to Platonic forms of thought. There is, for example, a well developed patristic and medieval tradition of biblical commentary that draws on Platonic categories to expound the idea of divine beauty. Thus when commenting on the Song of Songs, William of St Thierry can remark that in calling the groom "comely," the bride "understands and is convinced that anything praiseworthy she has, she holds from him, who is the good of all that is good and the Beauty of all that is beautiful" (cited in Sherry 2002: 63–4).

So in experiences of the love of God, in experiences of the beauty and grandeur of nature, and on the basis of inferential argument, considering God as the source of the world's excellences, and in view of the pervasiveness of Platonic forms of thought, theistic authors have often been drawn to speak of the divine goodness in aesthetic terms, as a matter of beauty or glory for example, and they have often taken a sensitivity to aesthetic excellence in the world to be, potentially, a spiritually important accomplishment, insofar as this excellence provides an initial, albeit imperfect, intimation of the aesthetic excellence of God. Granted that this is, in general terms, the devotional and reflective context for Western, theistic treatments of the idea of divine aesthetic goodness and of the significance of the experience of beauty for the spiritual life, I want to consider next how these abiding concerns of theistic thought have found expression in recent discussion. But first we should pause to consider Plato's treatment of these questions, since his reflections have proved to be especially deeply formative for theistic accounts of beauty.

Contemplation and the Spiritual Life

Plato's *Symposium* is of course the philosophical *locus classicus* for the idea that ultimate reality is to be conceived as beautiful, and it is notable that in this work, ultimate Beauty is said to be reached by way of a progressive refinement of *eros*. Thus as with some strands of theistic tradition, so here it is the passionate seeking after a supreme good which discloses its character as not just the standard of good in some moral sense, but as beautiful. In the *Symposium*, Socrates recounts how a woman named Diotima once explained to him the mysteries of the love of beauty. According to Diotima, *eros* is to be directed in the first instance towards other human beings from the point of view of their bodily beauty. In short, it is the *eros* of sexual attraction, directed at the bodies of fellow men or boys in particular, which provides the initial impetus for the spiritual life. But this focus is to be transcended, or as we might say sublimated, as *eros* comes to be trained on a range of other objects, first of all, the beauty of bodies in general, rather than simply the body of the beloved, and then beauty of "soul," and the beauty of "activities and institutions." Socrates concludes:

The man who has been guided thus far in the mysteries of love, and who has directed his thoughts towards examples of beauty in due and orderly succession, will suddenly have revealed to him as he approaches the end of his initiation, a beauty whose nature is marvellous indeed . . . This beauty is first of all eternal; it neither comes into being nor passes away . . . next, it is not beautiful in part and ugly in part . . . he will see it as absolute, existing alone with itself . . . and all other beautiful things as partaking of it.

(Plato 1951: 93–4)

Here the passionate pursuit of beauty, and the progressive re-direction of the energy associated with erotic attraction, is given a foundational role in the spiritual life. And a metaphysics is provided which fits this conception of human possibilities: beautiful things "partake" in Beauty itself, and accordingly, however imperfectly, disciplined attention to these things can set the adept on the road towards a fuller apprehension of that timeless Beauty.

It is striking that this text privileges vision, at first sensory and later intellectual vision, as the modality through which beauty is to be encountered. And while it accords

a role to the appreciation of sensory beauty as a step along the spiritual path, it is clear that this sort of appreciation is, with time, to be set aside, so that the gaze of the lover of beauty comes to be fixed securely on non-worldly rather than worldly beauty. Indeed, Socrates goes on to speak of the joy of the true philosopher (or lover of wisdom) who “instead of a beauty tainted by human flesh and color and a mass of perishable rubbish, is able to apprehend divine beauty where it exists apart and alone” (Plato 1951: 95).

Of course, in the *Symposium*, Plato is talking about an experience of the Form of Beauty, rather than of God understood in conventionally theistic terms. But his perspective has proved abidingly influential in theistic thought. Here, for example, is Gregory of Nyssa’s description of the kind of re-direction of attention that is characteristic of progress in the spiritual life: “To look with a free devoted gaze upon heavenly delights, the soul . . . will transfer all its power of affection from material objects to the intellectual contemplation of immaterial beauty” (Gregory of Nyssa 1979: 343; cited in Soskice 2007: 16).

This general scheme, according to which we begin with a concern for worldly beauty and then rise, through a disciplined process of ascent, to a more elevated spiritual condition, is refracted in later philosophical tradition in a variety of ways, and later theistic engagement with aesthetic questions can be read in many ways as an ongoing critical appropriation of this Platonic perspective.

Developing the Contemplative Tradition

Arthur Schopenhauer evokes this Platonic tradition quite explicitly in his account of the spiritual significance of aesthetic experience. He suggests that artworks can give us access to the “Forms” of things, providing that we attend to them in abstraction from their location within some wider fabric of causal relations, and apart from any consideration of their usefulness for satisfying the appetites of the ego. He writes for example of how:

the transition that is possible . . . from the common knowledge of particular things to knowledge of the Idea [or Form] takes place suddenly, since knowledge tears itself free from the service of the will precisely by the subject’s ceasing to be merely individual, and being now a pure will-less subject of knowledge. Such a subject of knowledge . . . rests in fixed contemplation of the object presented to it out of its connexion with any other . . . Further, we . . . devote the whole power of our mind to perception . . . and let the whole of our consciousness be filled by the calm contemplation of the natural object actually present, whether it be a landscape, a tree, a rock, a crag, a building, or anything else. We lose ourselves entirely in this object.

(Schopenhauer 1969: 178–9)

Schopenhauer goes on to suggest that works of art, insofar as they are apprehended in this contemplative mode, can affect this same sort of release from egocentric concerns, with the result that the person again takes on the status of a “will-less subject of knowledge.” And when they are apprehended on this basis, the arts give us access to Forms such as gravity and rigidity, to take the particular case of architecture (Schopenhauer 1969: 214). Schopenhauer’s account differs from that of the *Symposium* insofar as the adept’s attention remains fixed upon the material world; but as in Plato, so here, contemplation

of the Ideas is associated with a transmutation of desire or, perhaps more exactly, with the temporary cessation of desire. Kant's influence is also evident here—especially his suggestion that “a judgement about beauty, in which the least interest mingles is very partial and is not a pure judgement of taste” (Kant 1951 [1790]: 39), and his proposal that that “free beauties” can be appreciated simply for themselves, and independently of any question of their purpose (ibid.: 65–6). Where such beauties are concerned, we need have no knowledge of the nature of a thing, or of its function, to find it beautiful; instead, the satisfaction we find in the appearance of the thing is grounded, Kant suggests, not in our familiarity with some concept of the thing, or in some account of its purpose, but in “the free play of the imagination and understanding” (ibid.: 52–3).

This association of the aesthetic attitude—and the appreciation of art in particular—with the absorbed contemplation of things for their own sake, and the suggestion that contemplation of this kind is spiritually or religiously elevating, is a commonplace of recent work in aesthetics. Clive Bell's 1914 text *Art* is a classic of this genre. Bell writes that:

If an object considered as an end in itself moves us more profoundly . . . than the same object considered as a means to practical ends or a thing related to human interests—and this is undoubtedly the case—we can only suppose that when we consider anything as an end in itself we become aware of that in it which is of greater moment than any qualities it may have acquired from keeping company with human beings. Instead of recognising its accidental and conditioned importance, we become aware of its essential reality, of the God in everything, of the universal in the particular, of the all-pervading rhythm.

(Bell 1914: 54; cited in Wolterstorff 2005: 327)

On this account, the appreciation of things as “ends in themselves” (this turn of phrase is again an echo of Kant, of course) gives us access to their intrinsic qualities, so that they are apprehended as they really are, and not as they appear through the distorting lens of human self-interest. And such an apprehension, so the argument goes, amounts to an insight into the fundamental nature of the world or, for a pantheist like Bell, an insight into the divine.

Iris Murdoch's writings provide another, widely discussed formulation of the idea that contemplative absorption in things for their own sake, and independently of their usefulness, can be spiritually edifying, by freeing us from our usual self-preoccupation. She cites, for example, an occasion when she had been sunk in recollection of some hurt done to her pride, when her attention came to rest on a kestrel, with the result that there was now, as she puts it, “nothing but kestrel” (Murdoch 2001: 84). (Compare Schopenhauer's idea that we can “lose ourselves entirely” in the object of aesthetic contemplation.) Art is spiritually important, Murdoch urges, because it calls us to this same sort of attentiveness to things for their own sake and independently of their significance as resources for the fulfillment of human projects. “Art,” as she says, “affords us a pure delight in the independent existence of what is excellent” (Murdoch 2001: 85).

Janet Martin Soskice's essay “Love and Attention” (Soskice 2007) belongs to this same school of thought. Soskice's treatment of the bodily, other-regarding character of loving, maternal attention is broadly sympathetic to the contemplative tradition, but at the same time seeks to reform it in various respects. She takes a particular interest in the idea that our everyday material environment (and not only some Platonically

conceived supra-material realm) can be properly the object of loving attention, and in the idea that bodily responses, including emotional responses, have an important part to play in sustaining the relevant forms of attentive engagement. Her account is also keenly sensitive to the role of attention in supporting our relations with other human beings from an ethical point of view. These same concerns (the importance of everyday material context, the role of ethical commitments, and the significance of the emotions and other forms of bodily response) run through a broad swathe of contemporary writing in theological aesthetics. Let us consider some of this work next.

The Role of Bodily Response and Material Context

George Pattison's work provides a good example of an approach to theological aesthetics which foregrounds the role of bodily responses while continuing to affirm that a contemplative appreciation of the artwork—which abstracts from any question of its usefulness for practical or didactic purposes—provides the surest way of apprehending its aesthetic import. In the following passage, Pattison is discussing Bill Viola's video clip of a naked man who can be seen sinking into some water and out of view, before rising to the surface some time later, and then sinking again, as the process repeats itself. Pattison says of this work that: "*The Messenger* was not made with any specific doctrinal intent or iconographical reference. However, its positioning near the nave font of [Durham] Cathedral opened rich seams of doctrinal symbolism around the themes of baptism, death and resurrection" (Pattison 1998: 183).

On this perspective, the aesthetic meaning of an artwork is given in the first instance in the non-conceptually mediated impact of the sensory qualities of the work on the body, where this impact involves some appreciation of the work's appearance in sensory terms. Once we have grasped in this primordial way the significance for the body of a particular configuration of sensory qualities, we can then consider how the aesthetic meaning of the work might interact with other kinds of meaning, including doctrinal meanings. An artwork can function in this way, according to Pattison, because there is a "language before language that is the primary matrix of symbolic formation and that is shared by Christian and non-Christian art alike" (Pattison 1998: 183). Thus *The Messenger* draws us, in the first instance, into a pre-linguistic, bodily appreciation of the potencies of water. And a particular doctrinal scheme, such as the Christian account of the significance of the waters of baptism, as a source of spiritual cleansing, or as implicated in the believer's dying and rising with Christ, can then take root in this primordial meaning, and further define the significance of water in terms of a creed-specific worldview.

In the same vein, Pattison suggests that Craigie Aitchison's 1994 picture *Crucifixion*

works [in spite of its title] . . . as a painting . . . rather than as the bearer of doctrinal or narrative references. Its media are the intensity and tonality of color, the relationship between color and spatial organization, and the primordial language of the body itself, not conventional iconographical signs

(Pattison 1998: 187)

When this arrangement is inverted, and we instead begin with doctrinal meanings, which the artwork is intended to illustrate, the result is likely to be second-rate art or kitsch (Pattison 1998: 178).

So Pattison's perspective treats the aesthetic significance of the artwork as intrin-

sic to the work, and independent of any external system of reference, other than the primordial response of the body. And to this extent his approach, like Bell's, can be inserted within the broadly Schopenhaurian tradition to which I alluded just now. But by contrast with Bell, Pattison is interested in the possibility that works such as *The Messenger* can sensitize the believer to a kind of elemental symbolism which is inherent in the properties of substances such as water, and which can, in turn, be taken up in conventionally theistic discourse. Pattison maintains that such an approach, with its emphasis upon the role of bodily response in constituting a "language before language," provides a "way of overturning the Neo-Platonic prejudice against thoroughgoing incarnationism" (Pattison 1998: 184). On this view, incarnational theists are committed to enjoying the material world in its materiality, and the appreciation of an artwork for its sensory qualities, and not simply for its communication of some latent intellectual content, marks, for Pattison, a natural extension of this attitude of mind. In a similar vein, John Drury has remarked on the "love for the world of mortal appearances" which is implied in any serious affirmation of the claim that the Word became flesh, and it is partly for this reason that he is able to ascribe a Christian significance to Velazquez's meticulous handling of the appearance of a pitcher of water in his picture *The Waterseller of Seville* (Drury 1999: 180–1).

Although not writing as a theist, Anthony O'Hear has advanced a somewhat similar perspective when suggesting that if there is a God, then the rationale for human existence is surely given, at least in significant part, in our distinctive sensibility, and specifically in our capacity to bring to the world a consciousness that is both sensory (here like the other animals) and intellectual (here like God and the angels, if there be such). Following some remarks on atheistic perspectives on the significance of a human life, O'Hear continues:

The idea that there is in human perception a singular and irreducible revelation of the real world becomes even more plausible if we see human existence as cosmically intended in some way [by God]. For what, from the cosmic point of view, could be the point of human existence, other than that the cosmos should be experienced and understood in a human way? It is worth noting here that not even God, being a-temporal, a-spatial and immaterial, could know what it is like to be a human being.

(O'Hear 1992: 52)

O'Hear argues that this perspective on the significance of a human life implies not only that the distinctive phenomenology of the specifically human mode of experience of the world should be appreciated for its own sake, but also that some styles of art are to be preferred to others. He suggests, for example, that the work of Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin is to be preferred to that of Mark Rothko on the grounds that Chardin draws us into an appreciation of human experience in its quotidian reality, whereas Rothko's work turns us away from sensory engagement with our material context, which is the real locus of significance for a human life, and towards a realm of abstraction. O'Hear comments: "Is engulfment, the wiping away of all determination and horizons, what life—and art—is all about? If it is, then human effort and perspective are, in the final analysis, mocked" (O'Hear 1992: 50–1).

So, on these grounds, O'Hear urges, we should prefer the closely observed representation of a domestic scene, where "the objects emerge shyly, from a soft and often

indeterminate background,” that is characteristic of Chardin’s work to the content-less monumentality of a Rothko canvas (O’Hear 1992: 48). If this judgment is intended to register an aesthetic and not just a metaphysical preference, then presumably we should suppose that the look of the Chardin canvas, to the properly trained eye, is in some respect richer, and this is clearly O’Hear’s view. (He remarks, for example that he soon finds “the empty sublimity” of Rothko’s canvases “deeply unsatisfying” (O’Hear 1992: 50)—and this lack of satisfaction registers, I take it, a visual and not just a metaphysical preference.) But at the same time, O’Hear also takes his observations concerning the significance of a human life to provide a criterion for assessing metaphysical schemes, and he rejects John Hick’s account of the Real in itself as a Rothkoesque kind of venture, on the grounds that it takes ultimate reality to lack any humanly discernible determinacy, insofar as the “Real in itself” is said to be neither one nor many, neither personal nor impersonal, and neither good nor evil. Such a metaphysic, O’Hear urges, is humanly insupportable, since it denies everyday human experience any final significance, because on this view the discriminations that are characteristic of our everyday experience count for naught within an account of what is ultimately real.

So O’Hear and Pattison both propound an aesthetic that is intended to give proper acknowledgment to the bodily experience of human beings, and both take issue with theological traditions, whether Platonic or Hickian, which have a tendency to divert our attention from the realm of sensory experience towards another, allegedly more refined or more elevated realm. But they differ insofar as Pattison treats discursive thought as a kind of add-on to aesthetic experience, whereas O’Hear takes the human mode of experience, as at once sensory and intellectual, to be the starting point for any reflection on the nature of aesthetic value. As it happens, these authors also disagree on the aesthetic merits of abstract art. It could be that O’Hear’s hostility to the implicit metaphysics of, for example, Rothko’s work has misled him here. After all, the very abstraction of some works of art surely invites us to appreciate them simply for their sensory qualities (and apart from any question of what they represent, or apart from any adventitious associations which they might call to mind). And might not this be one way of becoming more finely attuned to, and of learning to savor more deeply, the distinctively human mode of experience?

O’Hear’s account suggests that the fundamental importance of art for human life is related to its power to throw a revealing light on the realm of everyday experience. This claim fits with the commonplace observation that the human significance of certain places, and perhaps especially of scenes from nature, is more readily communicated in a poetic idiom than in the language of prose. (This point is sometimes put by saying that “place” as distinct from “space,” considered from a geometrical or quantitative point of view, is best understood in these terms.) There are various ways of understanding how this might be so. Most simply, we might suppose that we typically register the significance of places not so much theoretically or discursively, but pre-reflectively, by way of emotional response and bodily posture for example. And a poem can arguably re-present the phenomenology of our experience of a place in these terms, and so communicate the existential import of the place. Edward Picot has suggested that some such perspective is implied in the work of various nature poets. Here is his account of a view that he associates with R. S. Thomas in particular, although it clearly belongs within a more broadly defined tradition of thought:

By analysing things [science] separates them out from the continuum of the creative world and then chops them up into smaller and smaller pieces in order

to find out how they work; and this process is begun by separating the human observer from the world in which he lives, turning him from a subjective participant into an objective analyst . . . Creative thought, unlike science, unites the poet or artist with the observed world through his imaginative response, and reunites different parts of the world with one another into a newly-integrated whole.

(Picot 1997: 106)

On this view, the arts, and perhaps poetry especially, can bring us to a livelier appreciation of the character of the pre-reflective life-world—the world, in other words, of everyday experience, in which we are participants rather than disengaged observers. This consideration provides a further reason, in addition to the reasons cited by O’Hear, for taking the arts to be theologically important. For the various theisms are all interested in facilitating an existentially dense appreciation of the significance of certain places. Most obviously, they are interested in understanding “sacred” places in these terms. But they also seek to ascribe a particular, tradition-relative existential meaning to the meta-place that is the world; and they often take this meaning to be disclosed micro-cosmically in localized places (Barrie 1996; Jones 2000). Insofar as all of this is true, and insofar as poetry, for example, has the power to reveal, and also to shape, our appreciation of the existential import of places, then this is a further reason for taking the arts to be religiously important. Here again, the theological importance of the arts is relative to their power to reflect and to structure our experience of the sensory world (Wynn 2009: 206–26).

The Role of the Emotions and of Ethical Commitments

It has long been recognized that the arts have a capacity to stimulate the emotions. In *The Republic*, Plato sought to proscribe some forms of music because of their capacity to arouse unruly and otherwise harmful emotions (Plato 1970: Book III). This suspicion of the arts, and of music in particular, continues into the Christian era. For example, Augustine was exercised by the question of whether it can be right to sing in church. And he remarks that: “when it happens to me that the song moves me more than the thing that is sung, I confess that I have sinned blamefully and then prefer not to hear the singer” (cited in Viladesau 2000: 20). Here aesthetic meaning is being subordinated to the communication of verbal, doctrinal meaning. Aquinas, who was writing at a time when music was a much more firmly established part of the Christian liturgy, takes a rather different stance. He suggests that:

if someone sings out of devotion, that person is [even] more attentive to the words: first, because one dwells on them longer [in song]. Second, because, as Augustine says [in the *Confessions* bk. X], “all the affections of our soul, by their own diversity, have their proper measures [*modos*] in voice and song, and are stimulated by I know not what secret correspondence.” And likewise for those who hear the singing: even if they sometimes do not understand what is being sung, they nevertheless understand the reason for the singing, namely, the praise of God; and this suffices to excite their devotion [ST II II, q 91 art. 2, ad 5].

(Cited in Viladesau 2000: 22 (square brackets in original))

In this passage, Aquinas follows Augustine, insofar as he subordinates aesthetic meaning to the meaning of the text: singing can be fitting, he notes, insofar as it leads us to dwell more attentively on the words of the text. But the second of the considerations which he cites leads him beyond this position, for here he acknowledges that singing can be religiously appropriate even if the words should be obscured thereby, providing that the devotion of the singer is imparted to the listener. For Aquinas, music's power in this regard is to be attributed presumably, at least in part, to the "secret correspondence" between forms of music and the "affections." So his position here implies that the power of the arts to simulate the affections can be put to theologically productive use. This debate concerning the need to subordinate music to the communication of textual meanings continues into the Reformation period, and fluctuations in the debate are nicely illustrated in the varied output of Thomas Tallis.

Richard Viladesau takes Aquinas' stance a step further by suggesting that the emotions aroused in musical experience, and in experiences of beauty in other contexts, can provide a mode of encounter with God. In such experiences, he notes:

being is seen as capable of being apprehended with joy . . . Yet this same being—both the being that is apprehended and the being of the one apprehending—is always limited, finite, marked with nonbeing and bearing the memory of death. In itself, it appears incapable of supporting a total affirmation of the joy of existence. But the aesthetic act is possible and real because finite being in its apprehension by spirit is borne by its source and goal, which is "co-apprehended" with it—not in a separate act, alongside it, but rather as what is interior to categorical being and to the apprehending mind.

(Viladesau 1999: 136)

Theists have argued, in biblical times and since, that the experience of beauty provides evidence of the existence of God. Perhaps the most famous such argument of recent decades is that of F. R. Tennant, who maintained that the "saturation" of the natural world with beauty does not admit of a Darwinian or any other naturalistic explanation, and is best understood by reference to the purposes of a beneficent God (1956: 91–2). By contrast with this tradition, Viladesau is not propounding a version of the argument from design. His comments clearly reflect the influence of Plato, and the erotic ideal of the *Symposium*, and also the influence of Kant, and his interest in identifying the conditions of the possibility of certain kinds of experience, and his insistence that God cannot be an immediate object of experience (compare Viladesau's remarks on "co-apprehension"). Viladesau is not so much mounting an argument, as appealing to the phenomenology of a certain kind of aesthetic experience, in which the emotion of joy in particular appears to be directed beyond its immediate object, which cannot be finally satisfying, and towards some ultimate source of beauty.

Anthony Monti has developed a somewhat similar line of reflection, when suggesting that the deep significance that we find in our experience of art is best accommodated within a Christian worldview, because Christian theology provides an interpretive context that allows us to affirm that art is indeed revelatory of the fundamental conditions of human existence. For example, the Christian story allows us to say that our experience of art provides an anticipation of the transfiguration of the material order that will be achieved at the eschaton (Monti 2003: Chapter 6).

Monti is presenting what he calls a “natural theology of the arts.” Other Christian theologians have been more emphatic about the need to ground a Christian aesthetic in distinctively Christian criteria of aesthetic value. These writers favor a “theological aesthetics” over an “aesthetic of theology” (Begbie 2006: 61, following von Balthasar 1982; see also Ward 2003). Unsurprisingly, a number of these authors postulate a close connection between aesthetic excellence and moral excellence. Jeremy Begbie, for example, appeals to a Christological criterion of beauty, citing these words of Joseph Ratzinger: “in his face that is so disfigured, there appears the genuine, extreme beauty: the beauty of love that goes ‘to the very end’” (Begbie 2006: 63). On this kind of approach, we can say that: “Primary beauty is a disposition and act of benevolent consent, primordially present as God’s self-transcending generosity” (Farley 2001: 102). Such a construal of beauty provides one way of accommodating Isaiah Chapter 53, which the church has read Christologically, where it is said of a “suffering servant” figure that: “he hath no form nor comeliness: and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him” (v. 2).

Concluding Thoughts

I have been reading theistic aesthetics as a set of variations on the ideal of contemplation or attention that can be found in Plato’s *Symposium*. As we have seen, a good deal of the literature reviewed above has understood contemplation in practically disengaged terms, and has therefore bracketed out the question of the uses to which an artwork might be put, over and above the “use” of aesthetic contemplation. Some modern literature has questioned whether religious art can be adequately understood in these terms, since such art is evidently designed for use, in worship and other practical contexts. Nicholas Wolterstorff, for example, has argued that when we appreciate a hymn or icon, or some other religious artifact, in a liturgical context, we are not thereby denying its “autonomy” as a work of art. On the contrary, such artifacts “come into their own” when they are used for the purpose for which they were intended, and their excellence as works of art may be relative to their fulfillment of this purpose (Wolterstorff 2005: 334; see also Wolterstorff 1980.) Similarly, Gordon Graham has argued that some aesthetically important features of a religious work of art may only become apparent when the work is used for worship. For instance, it is only when a church building is put to such use that we can grasp how its structure fittingly (here is a term of aesthetic appraisal) serves the end of worship (2007: 134).

Roger Scruton’s account of aesthetic value represents a kind of compromise in this debate: he allows that knowledge of the function of an artwork can be relevant to an assessment of its aesthetic merits; but he also maintains that the criterion of excellence here remains, rather as the contemplative tradition has supposed, the depth or intensity, in some aesthetically relevant sense, of the experience which is afforded by the artwork. Scruton gives as an example the aesthetic appreciation of Gothic churches. Our experience of such churches can be enriched, he notes, once we know that they were intended to present an image of the heavenly city. He comments:

[I]t is clear from Abbot Suger’s account of the building of St Denis . . . that the architects of the Gothic churches were motivated by a perceived relationship between the finished church and the Heavenly City of Christian speculation . . . Each great church can be considered as a concatenation of smaller structures, of aedicules, fitted together as arches, chapels, windows and spires, and so can

be seen as an assembled city, rather than as a single entity minutely subdivided. . . . But the “interpretation” here is not a “thought” that is separable from the experience—it is there *in* the experience, as when I see the dots of a puzzle picture as a face, or the man in the moon.

(Scruton 1979: 74–5)

On this account, the thought of the heavenly city can enter into the appearance of Gothic churches; in other words, a different perceptual gestalt can be produced when we allow our experience of such churches to be guided by the thought of “an assembled city,” as distinct from the thought of “a single entity subdivided.” Again, the rightness in aesthetic terms of this reading of the Gothic church, as an image of the heavenly city, is not secured by the rightness of the interpretation from an art historical point of view; instead, it is given in the richness of the experience (in the new-found unity in the appearances, for example) which this interpretation affords.

It is a striking implication of Scruton’s example that religious thoughts can be apprehended, and reckoned with, not only in verbal or discursive terms but also perceptually, when those thoughts are inscribed in the sensory appearances of things. This possibility points to a further way in which the arts can be religiously important—as ways of engaging with religious ideas in perceptual terms. Some accounts of religious experience can be fruitfully interpreted along these lines. Consider, for example, Jonathan Edwards’ description of his conversion experience:

The appearance of everything was altered; there seemed to be, as it were, a calm, sweet cast, or appearance of divine glory, in almost everything. God’s excellency, his wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in everything; in the sun, moon, and stars; in the clouds and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, and trees; in the water and all nature.

(Edwards cited in James 1911: 249)

This experience seems to be formally like the experience that Scruton describes: in Scruton’s example, the thought of the heavenly city penetrates the appearance of a Gothic church, so that the church provides an image of that city; in the case which Edwards reports, the thought of God’s excellency, we could say, comes to inhabit the appearance of the sensory world, with the result that this world comes to image the divine nature. In such cases, intellect and sense work together, in doctrinally specific ways, so as to transform, and aesthetically enrich, our experience of the sensory world.

In the course of this chapter, I have reviewed quite a range of ways (but by no means all of the ways!) in which our experience of art, or of beauty or aesthetic excellence of other kinds, might prove to be religiously important. It is notable that philosophers of religion have, in general, been more interested in epistemological questions, or questions of truth, than in questions of beauty, and striking that when they speak of the divine nature, they are more often occupied with the divine goodness considered in broadly moral terms than with the divine beauty. Questions concerning the beauty of God, and concerning the role of aesthetic experience in the life of faith, surely deserve more sustained attention. Most fundamentally, this is because religious faith, on standard accounts, is not just a commitment of the intellect, but also of the will (see Aquinas S.T. II II q 4). And if we are to understand why God should be found attractive, so that the will is engaged, and why the life of faith should be found attractive, so

that a person might wish to participate in it, then we shall need to have recourse to a vocabulary that is rich in aesthetic nuance.

Related Topics

Chapter 36: Religious Diversity; Chapter 41: Environment; Chapter 42: Architecture; Chapter 44: Literature; Chapter 45: Music

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Recommended Reading

Cahn, S. M. and A. Meskin (eds), (2008) *Aesthetics: A Comprehensive Anthology*, Oxford: Blackwell. A useful collection of ancient and modern work in philosophical aesthetics.

Eco, U. (1988) *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. A classic study of medieval aesthetics and its religious and metaphysical context.

Gorringe, T. (2011) *Earthly Visions: Theology and the Challenges of Art*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. An instructive review of how paintings which are devoid of any explicitly religious subject matter can still communicate a theological meaning.

Ruskin, J. (1906) *Modern Painters*, London: Dent. Ruskin's account of the revelatory significance of natural beauty will repay study. See especially Volume 2.

Scruton, R. (2009) *Beauty*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. A lively and accessible introduction to key themes in aesthetics.

44

LITERATURE

Douglas Hedley

Poetry lends religion her wealth of symbols and similes; religion restores them again to poetry, clothed with so splendid a radiance that they appear to be no longer symbols, but to partake (I might almost say) of the nature of sacraments.

(Keble 1912: 11. 480)

It is easy to forget that we possess different literary genres of philosophical writing. The fragments of pre-Socratic philosophers like Parmenides and Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* are in poetic form. By contrast, some poems have a clearly philosophical component. Wordsworth's *Prelude*, for example, is a philosophically informed protest against the kind of mechanical materialism that was pervasive in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British thought. But since philosophy is based upon argument and "providing justification or reason" (Plato's *logon didonai*, *Republic* VII 534), prose is generally the preferred medium. A more serious question pertains to the truth component. In Book Ten of the *Republic* Plato banishes poets from the Republic because they are liars. Here we encounter Plato's notorious "old quarrel between philosophy and poetry" (*Republic*, 607b5–6).

Myth, Polytheism and Postmodernism: Onto-theology and the Arbitrary Sign

There has been a dramatic increase of knowledge of religious practices throughout the world through the voyages and explorations of Europeans in the early modern period. From the human sacrifices of the Aztecs to the widow burning of the Hindus, Europeans were fascinated by manifold discoveries of pagan religions. Throughout the Enlightenment there were battles over the relative priority of polytheism and theism. In the heyday of the nineteenth-century *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, "religion" was presented as a development from crude polytheism to ethical monotheism, but David Hume and Edward Gibbon had pleaded eloquently for the advantages of polytheism. Similarly, in the contemporary context some have pleaded for the violent and intolerant dimension of monotheism. The God of the Hebrew bible accepted the sacrifice of Abel but rejected that of Cain (Schwarz 1997). Moses inaugurated the fateful distinction between true and false, with the attendant legacy of excluding, persecuting and punishing heresies and pagans (Assmann 2009). In the wake of post-modern relativisms, the pluralism of polytheism offers renewed attractions.

Have we not inherited a theism of reason and a polytheism of the imagination? Does not ancient poetry need the pantheon? “Myths” are strictly stories of the gods. Monotheism does not tolerate these “gods” and thus theism could be seen to stifle the imagination by definition. One thinks of Homer or Hesiod; the Graeco-Roman gods survived through the interpretative work of philosophers via a process of allegorization into the medieval period (Brisson 2004). In the Renaissance there was a revival of this activity. Perhaps even the austere monotheism of the Hebrew Bible has its own polytheism in the deeper recesses of the “palimpsest” of the final redaction of the text. In second Isaiah we have monotheism, but there seem to be archaic polytheistic materials in the inherited canon.

Is the flourishing of literature in theology departments a return to polytheism?

Imagination and Reason

I am a rationalist. For me reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning. Imagination, producing new metaphors or revivifying old, is not the cause of truth but its condition.

(Lewis 1961: 265)

The dominant mechanistic materialism of Western philosophy since the seventeenth century has generated a long literature on the mind as a machine and, in particular, on the quality of conscious experience. One might sensibly interrogate the misleading image of the machine. We can bracket questions about the ultimate nature of consciousness or even the evolutionary purpose of consciousness. Various efforts in artificial intelligence to replicate human mental processes through the employment of sophisticated algorithmic structures remain question begging. However great any outward parity between the computer and the human mind, this is no basis for the conclusion that the computer is endowed with consciousness.

Apart from the frankly jejune nature of the mind-machine analogy, there is also a mistake in seeing consciousness as the primary philosophical issue. Intelligent agents act with various levels of awareness. Consider the accomplished musician playing with little consciousness of the movements of each finger, to say nothing of actions performed while asleep or while suffering from a brain disorder. Philosophically significant is the problem of the complex levels of mind. It helps us to integrate the conscious ego with submerged aspects of the psyche. Literature is uniquely placed to explore the nature of the mind. We need another self-conscious agent in order to see ourselves. Just as we need friends to help us to understand ourselves, literature gives us a way of exploring another world and yet finding out more about ourselves.

Drest in a little brief authority,
Most ignorant of what he's most assured,
His glassy essence, like an angry ape,
Plays such fantastic tricks before his heaven
As make the angels weep.

(Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure* II, ii, 110–23)

Mechanistic models of human action have burgeoned in the wake of the scientific revolution. The inadequacy of any purely mechanistic or naturalistic models of human

nature can be seen when considering a characteristically human activity as simple as that of eating. The consumption of food is a basic requirement for the animal. But our closest relatives in the animal kingdom do not share food in the characteristically human manner. Although *Homo sapiens* emerged about 170,000 years ago in Africa, the records that suggest distinctively human activities such as art or food-sharing developed much later, perhaps 80,000 years ago. The sharing of food, or commensality, seems an activity quite unlike the eating practices of other species: eating while facing one another contrasts with the allocation and consumption of food among primates. Among high cultures, the feast or the banquet is an immensely important ritual: from the Greek symposium or Christian Eucharist to State banquets, wedding or funeral meals. If rituals are gradually accumulated imaginative deposits, our habits and actions are shaped by symbols and images (Jones 2007).

This is a striking fact about the imaginative or symbolic component of the most basic of human activities: we are shapers of, rather than shaped by, our environment. The recent deforesting of the Amazon shows that pre-conquest people planted those forests. Thus much of what is commonly thought of as natural has its basis in human culture. The creative shaping of our environment is grounded in the human capacity for not just reacting to stimulus but re-envisioning our habitat.

There is an unavoidable element of imagination in our interpretation of the world. To understand a set of events in a remote area is to imagine it. This is far removed from fantasy in the pejorative sense of idle make-believe. Even if we move from more basic human activities such as eating or even basic agriculture to high-level scientific work, it is clear that paradigm shifts in the natural sciences are also shifts of imaginative perspective. The atomistic hypothesis in ancient Greece or India preceded the empirical evidence: the theory in Antiquity predated the confirmation of the hypothesis in seventeenth-century science in the work of Boyle or Newton.

Know Thyself or Pilgrim's Progress!

Let us turn to Delphi, and the god whose temple has the mysterious exhortation "Know Thyself!" In Athenian tragedy this was taken in a negative sense to mean "know your limits" and don't upset the gods. But it was the philosophers who construed self-knowledge in a positive sense, and it is this positive construal of "Know Thyself!" that has played a great role in Western thought since Antiquity. One of the most important and defining aspects of the humanities is the development of this critical self-awareness. Especially in a world generated by free creatures—the realm of culture—we are bound to interpret the world in order to understand ourselves.

Thus, in the humanities, tradition plays a vastly more significant role than in the hard sciences. This necessarily hermeneutical dimension of *Homo sapiens* must cast doubt upon reductionist accounts. For all the attempts to depict the ruthless mechanisms of *Homo economicus* and *Homo natura*, one cannot rationally dispose with *Homo imaginans*. The central question is not consciousness but self-consciousness, and imagination is key to the solution. We are self-understanding creatures and also historical beings. A visit to a European football game or the opera, quite apart from Japanese tea ceremonies or reading about the blood sacrifices among the African Nuer people, provides abundant evidence for the claim that the observable behavior of human beings is highly ritualized. And rituals are the gradual deposit of imaginative activity. In the plethora of human

rituals and symbols, from birth to marriage and burial, human beings exist within an inherited “imaginary” of symbols.

It is often observed that the noun “imagination” has a wide range of meanings. There might be no core meaning to the word “imagination” but, rather, a family of resemblances. It is not immediately obvious why forming images or forming hypotheses, speculating or fantasizing should all be linked in any interesting manner. Many imaginings, for example, do not require any mental images. If one “imagines” that England might win the Ashes, the supposition does not require any images of English cricketers. Common to all meanings of imagining, however, is an intentional element: imaginings are about items or situations or actions. Intentionality and consciousness have become much more central in philosophical discussion in the last couple of decades. Consequently, the context of philosophical reflection upon the concept of imagination has changed radically since the mid-twentieth century, and especially since the austere behaviorism of Gilbert Ryle’s *The Concept of Mind* (1949).

While Aristotle thinks that the command of metaphor is a distinguishing feature of poetic genius, he avoids equivocation in his scientific writings. In the modern period Hobbes famously impugns metaphors and tropes as creating confusion in science proper. The question is whether symbols and metaphors are necessary and useful for knowledge or merely ornamental. Should figurative language be restricted to the poet and excluded from more stringent science? Plato’s enigmatic use of myths in his dialogues presents a particular instance of this problem, especially in the *Timaeus* and the *Republic*. In these dialogues myths are employed at crucial parts of the text. How do these myths or likely tales relate to reason or *logos*?

Yet too strict a division between poetry and the natural sciences is unsustainable. Poetry and the natural sciences are often as perplexing to the Thracian maid as philosophy. A great imaginative construction in a work of art often challenges and reconstructs our ideas about the world. Yet this re-building of our view of the world has a law-like quality. In a work of imagination there is an element of rightness. The great poet, for example, cannot be merely whimsical and unpredictable. If his or her vision is to be compelling it must have a logical and moral consistency and its own internal appropriateness. In Shakespeare’s great characters, for example, we have changes. Yet these changes are constrained by a need to be “true to life.” There is a dimension of the imagination which is not so much the power of fiction or generating unreal scenarios, but the capacity to experience reality.

Philosophy and science work with abstractions that have to be learned. One must acquire a specific vocabulary, largely inherited from the Greeks. But in poetry we are allowed to dwell upon the sense images of our immediate and familiar experience of the world. In this sense, philosophy and science seem abstract, pedantic and even crabbed when compared to the sensuous immediacy of the poetic image.

What is correct about the idea of “glassy essence”? The extraordinary human capacity for reflection, for considering our own subjective vantage point and not mere objects of observation, provides much of the fuel of literature. Great literature from Augustine to Proust is often dwelling explicitly on such reflexive intentionality—the communication of thought and experience and especially human joy and suffering. To read great literature is to enter imaginatively into another mind. As C. S. Lewis claims: “The nearest I have got to an answer is that we seek an enlargement of our being. We want to be more than ourselves” (Lewis 1992a: 137).

Narrative and Tradition

Alisdair McIntyre and Charles Taylor have rightly stressed the irreducibility of human agency to mechanical models. We are self-understanding creatures and the Scriptural narratives shape this understanding, whether these narratives are about Abraham, Moses, Mohammed, Krishna or the teaching of the Buddha. It is sometimes observed that atheism relies upon the paradigm that it is denying.

We dwell within an imaginative tradition. I wish to employ two examples to illustrate this. First, that of Shakespeare, as he is the Homer of the modern period. Through Shakespeare, we have the imaginative presentation of many themes of theism. Some, such as the doctrine of hell, are less prominent in our age than they were in his. Others, such as conscience, are still highly pertinent and rely upon strongly theistic assumptions about an overarching moral order (Hedley 2008: 162; for a contrary view, see Empson 1952: 125–57).

The second example can be seen among nineteenth-century intellectuals. The process of secularization has often produced a revised version of an inherited supernaturalism: Carlyle famously used the term *natural supernaturalism* to express the underlying or immanent aspect of the transcendent, a theme that pervades much nineteenth-century poetry and literature.

One senses palpable anxiety among many religious believers when the language of myth or imagination is applied to a historical religion such as Christianity. Yet any historical narrative is also an imagining and this does not necessarily imply doubts about its veracity. The depiction of Johnson by Boswell is a work of sympathetic imagining. One can compare and contrast the impression conveyed by Dr Johnson to others of his contemporaries, just as Xenophon's Socrates is different from that of Plato. Indeed, nor does the existence of mythic components in the narrative necessarily imply fiction. Alexander the Great or Napoleon were archetypal figures: the man from the outskirts, the visionary warrior, creator of empire and lawgiver, antiquarian and Romantic hero. Yet few doubt their historical existence. In the figure of Jesus Christ, we can sense a real personality, combining prudence with shocking radicalism of thought, moral rigorism as well as tenderness and sympathy. But the Gospel writers are not biographers and they are much more interested in the meaning of Jesus as Messiah than facts about his person.

In Western philosophy we have inherited a combination of a metaphysics of transcendence grounded in Semitic or Hellenic (especially neo-Platonic) monotheism. In the Far East, neither Buddhism nor Confucianism offers any approximation to the idea of a hierarchy of being or *scala naturae* culminating in a transcendent *prius* of all reality, actual and potential. Since occidentals have inherited such a vision of a reality transcending the empirical world, the correlate is that the informed imagination can point to a profounder and more ultimate reality than the solely factual. Moreover, where transcendent Divine truth meets the human imagination, we have revelation. Yet this revelation cannot be articulated without images or symbols. There is a continuum between an early novel such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, a spiritual allegory such as Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, an epic poem like Dante's *Commedia* or Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and the book of Revelation. Even in recent literature, we find a thoroughly secular writer like Thomas Mann, in his monumental tetralogy *Joseph und seine Brüder* (Joseph and His Brothers), drawing upon Scripture to feed his imagination.

We must distinguish between the conviction in the incomprehensible Divine mystery and the idea of God as unknowable. The first principle is essential for any serious theology. The second means the impossibility of natural theology. If we can know the Divine at all—apart from those appeals to revelation which can hardly be employed by philosophers—then it must be on the principle of imaginative analogy and a belief in the scale of Being. The transcendent God of Western theism is veiled and we are placed at an epistemic distance from his Being. Imagination in its highest sense is the awakening to an invisible world: “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). The role of the imagination in psychology, ethics and aesthetics provides a good analogy for thinking about the role of imagination in religious belief. In engaging with the inner lives of other human agents, with moral values or aesthetic qualities, we are required to employ imagination: to suppose, form hypotheses, empathize or imaginatively engage with alien peoples or worlds. Whether Herodotus or Thucydides, or even Solomon or Moses, we have to try to engage with another mind. There can be no “scientific” (in the narrow sense) account of engaging in thoughts and beliefs because of self-consciousness. The self-conscious employment of ideas resists law-like causal explanations. If we want to understand why Caesar crossed the Rubicon or Hannibal crossed the Alps, there is no avoiding the beliefs, values, and intentions of the agents. That which, for the purposes of my argument, I will call “Reason”—*νοῦς* in Plotinus and *intellectus* in either Augustine or Nicholas of Cusa—was in the past distinguished from discursive ratiocination (*διάνοια* or *ratio*). This Reason was not intrinsically opposed to what today we might call imagination. For the ancient or medieval scholar, the contemplation of supreme truth through reason was distinguished from lower forms of instrumental reason.

The Paradox of True Fiction

Can we learn more from Dante or Shakespeare than from history? Is it possible to obtain knowledge from non-historical narratives and images? The momentous and remarkable triumphs of natural science do not entitle or equip it to explain all phenomena. The physical description of the world excludes the most important fact about experience: consciousness. And for much conscious experience, imagination is a constituent element. The observation of a person, the viewing of a painting or the listening to a piece of music are all instances of intentional states where consciousness and imagination are virtually synonymous. In all such cases, awareness of the person, painted object or sounds is to interpret these phenomena *as* instances of a familiar friend, a horse or an aria. Moreover, it is the prerogative of the arts to explore the domain of self-awareness and the anxiety and excitement connected to the existence of the world as we know it.

The point is not: is there a failure of literal or factual representation but, rather, how do we achieve a more accurate and profound apprehension of reality, whereby this apprehension is always a form of approximation. The power of literature lies precisely in its capacity to impart and divulge a dimension of reality: to point through words to reality.

Art is often thought of as imitating nature: “*Ars imitatur naturam.*” But what is nature? (Lewis: 1992b: 24–74). Perhaps “*natura*” is the intelligible cosmos. In physics we employ mathematics to penetrate the intelligible nature of things, consider the scientific revolution with its great instruments for exploring those aspects of nature that do not present

themselves to the naked eye, or consider again the forms of measurement available for exploring the structures of the physical cosmos; the telescope, microscope, thermometer or barometer. The poet is able to present the world so that we can perceive an otherwise obscured transcendence or mystery: the poet becomes a seer who is able to penetrate a non-empirical realm (Kugel 1990; see Hedley 2011: 51ff.).

Let me take the example of evil. Does not Shakespeare's Richard III dissect more vividly the nature of the tyrant rather than, say, biographies of Stalin or reports about Gaddafi? Richard is the tyrant full of "interior hatred" (Richard III, I, 3, 65). Richard's outward deformity reflects his interior discord and venom.

I have no brother, I am like no brother;
And this word "love," which greybeards call divine,
Be resident in men like one another
And not in me; I am myself alone.

(3 Henry VI, V, 6, 80–3)

The isolation described so viscerally in Shakespeare's verse (I am myself alone) is the dramatic representation of Plato's discursive and argumentative analysis of tyranny in the *Republic*. And Richard is ravaged by his own conscience:

My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,
And every tongue brings in a several tale,
And every tongue condemns me for a villain.

(Richard III, V, 3, 217–19)

Indeed, Richard's conscience is the source of appalling terror:

. . . shadows tonight
have struck more terror to the soul of Richard
Than can the substance of ten thousand soldiers.

(Richard III, V, 3, 217–19)

Shakespeare's work is an example of how drama and poetry can be both creative and truthful. Aristotle is thinking of such a phenomenon when he observes that poetry is more philosophical than history. The great poet is presenting universal truths of the human condition rather than contingent facts. The emotions that the great fictional works generate are of great interest. Why are we moved by the fate of Hecuba or Hamlet? Aristotle famously thought that the emotions aroused by tragedy could be said to have a purging effect. The sense in which we are moved by fiction is intriguing philosophically. Why should we be affected by fictional persons or events? And why should this experience be regarded as a valuable or even purifying one? There is an important tradition of viewing great aesthetic works as possessing a strong didactic component. This is mirrored in the Christian New Testament by the parables. These are tales or fictions that convey truths. In John 3:1–21 Nicodemus asks Christ how a man can be reborn. The literalist Nicodemus states that a man cannot return into his mother's womb. Christ is emphatic that Nicodemus must use his imagination if he is to understand the true nature of Divine regeneration.

Nature is an enigmatic image of its Divine source. Hence we have the hidden mystery of the book of nature as well as the book of revelation (Hadot 2006). "Nature never set

forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done . . . Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden” (Sidney 1965: 101). As beautifully articulated by Pierre Hadot, many thinkers and poets dwelt upon the Heraclitan gnomic utterance “nature loves to hide” (*phusis kruptesthai phile*). Since Nature is apt to conceal herself, and we see the world through a glass darkly, as St Paul insists (I Corinthians 13:12), the poet is uniquely capable of shaping our imaginative perception of nature. One might think of Wordsworth and the Lakeland district.

Symbolism

Ernest Rutherford famously quipped that there is only physics or stamp collecting. Perhaps the materialism, or physicalism, that has become such a dominant philosophical position in the contemporary world, has shut off the traditional symbolism of a world suffused with transcendence. Is not the traditional sense of the sacred irretrievably lost? There may be much symbolism in the contemporary world—Plato’s image of the cave is a most powerful analogy for our world which is suffused with images of brands through television, cinema, the internet, and so on. But the powers conveyed by such images are not meant to represent superior immaterial powers. Psychoanalysis might explore these images, but it tends to locate their source in the depths and recesses of human consciousness, not beyond it. Freud, in particular, seems especially sensitive to the pervasive nature of symbolism within human experience, whether normal or pathological, conscious, semi or unconscious. Symbolism is a way in which abstract ideas can be communicated through a culture via the imagination: it is no less than the fusing or throwing together of the finite and the infinite (Hedley 2008: 142). The ancient and medieval occidental mind dwelt symbolically. Man was envisaged as suspended between two realms: the earthly and the transcendent. Symbols provided a mediation and an iconic channel between these domains. Light, for example, was a central symbol in the philosophy of the neo-Platonists, especially Plotinus. The figurative dimension of the symbol was in no way disconnected from its metaphysical and epistemic dimensions. The metaphysical dimension of light was understood as the *lux intelligibilis*: the essential intelligibility of the universe. The epistemic dimension, then, was the process and method of attaining discernment which was contrasted with ordinary ignorance and confusion, and the clarity of thought that enables the mind to analyze and combine, to detect real connections in the objects of the world. The two dimensions of light could be further coupled with the figurative dimension, such as metaphors of blindness and sight, awakening and sleep. An ancient or medieval mind would in likelihood have understood the light of the Hagia Sophia, the cathedral of Chartres or the *Commedia* of Dante as encompassing all of these dimensions. The visible levels of light in these works were not merely representations of a wholly other reality but were indeed manifestations of that transcendent reality which they symbolized.

Theism relies upon the idea of the goodness of God. A deist or a pantheist is not committed to this. The region of philosophy that deals with art is traditionally called aesthetics. But “aesthetics” is a relatively recent development. Medieval and Western philosophy was primarily concerned with the topic of beauty and was interested in how this relates to truth and goodness.

Beauty is truth, truth beauty, – that is all.
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know

(Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*)

Keats was expressing a view widespread in Antiquity that beauty must be related to truth. Equally beauty was thought to be related to goodness. The phrase “the beauty of holiness” of Psalms 29:2 captures this, where the contrast is between this holy beauty and the ugliness of sin.

It is difficult, however, to articulate a philosophically robust account of the relations between the three. If Hume is correct that morality is essentially utility, that is, what is “useful or agreeable to the person himself or to others,” it is hard to see how this utility is related to beauty. It is also puzzling for many philosophers why or how beauty might be related to truth. Yet an appeal to the imagination (as opposed to mere fantasy) could show how beauty and truth can be linked. Consider the creative fictions of great artistic beauty, such as the works of Shakespeare. Such works aspire to a certain truthfulness. As we have seen, Romanticism has popularized some distinction between imagination and fantasy or fancy. It is important to distinguish the cognitive capacity of the imagination, which can throw light upon the world, from those forms of imagination that produce fantasies and create a mawkish or cruel make-believe. Our emotions can be deepened or purified by a work of the imagination so that we can gain a clearer understanding of reality, whereas fantasy often indulges and gratifies the emotions without any real challenge. We can inhabit a world of fantasy just as we can inhabit a world constructed by the imagination, but we will not be instructed. Man’s creativity has a negative side. Selfishness, cruelty, anxiety and fanaticism can be the offspring of fantasy.

The theistic religions all assume a link between beauty, goodness and truth since all three have their basis in the transcendent reality of God. This is the foundation of the iconoclasm that all three Abrahamic religions share to a greater or lesser degree. The ban upon images of the Divine as idolatrous has its foundation in the conviction in the particular power of art to represent the transcendent truthfully and with reserve and awe for the sacred. If art were merely an organ of ornament or amusement, then there would be little point in the prohibitions and limits placed upon sacred art in the great religious traditions.

There is a tradition, which goes back to Epicurus, that views fear as the basis of religion and theology as grounded in anthropomorphism. But I have been pleading for another strand of Western philosophy, with its trajectory from Plato to Anselm, Dante, the Renaissance and the Cambridge Platonists, that identifies the supreme object of wonder as the transcendent good that is God and sees philosophy proper as a rational aspiration to the Divine.

If we are haunted by the idea of absolute perfection in a world of manifest imperfection, this is testimony to the power of the imagination to envisage the ultimate unity of value and existence. Beauty is often defined as the unity of a manifold. In architecture or a dramatic work the harmonious ordering of the parts constitutes much of the beauty of the work. A traditional theist cannot admire a work of art as beautiful if its morality is questionable, any more than she can admire a work of art if it presents an inherently false or beguiling image of life. The nineteenth-century Scottish philosopher Edward Caird would ridicule talk of that which was deemed “too good to be true,” by retorting that whatever was not true, was not good enough! (Temple 1924: 14). For the theist, truth presupposes goodness, and through beauty the mind can rise to a vision of transcendent unity. Yet it takes the work of imagination to remove the veil of phenomena of our habitual experience and to habituate the mind to the presence of the transcendent God of theism in the world.

Revelation

For theistic religions of the book, the so-called Abrahamic faiths, God is not merely an object of philosophical speculation, but also the author of revelation. We will not consider the theory of verbal dictation or fundamentalism. It suffices to note that within the Christian tradition the problem of translation is unavoidable. The Christian Bible has Hebrew and Aramaic sources translated into Greek, and here formal literary questions obtrude. The “I am” (*ego eimi*) utterances in St John’s Gospel rely upon the Septuagint translation of Exodus 3:14, “I am that I am” (*ego eimi ho on*: cf. John 6:35, 8:12, 10:7, 10:11, 11:25, 14:6, 15:1).

The Alexandrian tradition of reading allegorically and paying particular regard to spiritual meaning required interpreting Scripture with great literary sophistication. Many Christians throughout the centuries have claimed that God speaks but his speech is mediated through images. Such accounts have been supported by a theory of accommodation, that is, through images God is thought to adapt himself to the finite mind.

In the Renaissance we find parallels mooted between prophecy and poetry. Here prophecy is understood less as predicting or divining the future as the activity of the seer who, in seeing the Divine ideas experiences an opening of the heavens. In his famed *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* of 1753 Robert Lowth emphasized the literary quality and the poetic imagery of the Old Testament. This work exerted a great influence upon the Romantics. S. T. Coleridge in his *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* (1840) attacks what he calls bibliolatry, by which he means biblical literalism, as deadening the imagination. For Coleridge, there is no conflict between recognition of the literary quality of Scripture and its status as revelation. Indeed, he argues that as the working of the Holy Spirit becomes aligned to the regenerate imagination, the imagination is emancipated from bondage to idols and purified.

C. S. Lewis was among those who explored the link between literature and theism in both his imaginative work and his reflections upon the working of the imagination: especially through myth and symbol. Lewis dedicated his book on the Psalms to his friend Austin Farrer. Farrer’s theory of revelation as inspired images in *The Glass of Vision* of 1948 constitutes one of the greatest and most eloquent reflections upon revelation and theistic metaphysics in the modern period. The more recent writings of David Brown display a similar trajectory, though Brown moves beyond literature into plastic or visual arts and dance in order to expound and articulate his account of revelation. Also, while Farrer has quite a static theory of revelation, in the sense that he concentrates upon the revelation of Scripture, Brown extends the theory of imaginative apprehension diachronically through shifts in the history of the Church. In this way Brown adds an element of Newman’s classic, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845); namely, Newman’s view of tradition as necessarily changing in order to sustain the authentic Christian vision. Brown has developed over several volumes a powerful vision of the manner in which imaginative literature can reinforce and intensify the truths of revelation.

Conclusion

Is theology just a set of imaginative patterns or arbitrary narratives? Can literature no longer express the mystery of our experience? If we are ideologically committed to relativism or extreme skepticism, the answer is doubtless “no” (Hedley 2008: 175ff.).

Is literature a tool for exposing the ideologies informing particular power structures or is it the guide to new and unexplored dimensions of reality? Such debates revolve around the question of whether imagination is the handmaiden of truth or the source of seductive illusions. If one wishes to affirm the former, it is necessary to show how the imagination can be a legitimate tool in reasoning and how, perhaps, literature occupies a unique place in the conveying of theological truth. Correspondingly, one might add how faith in the Divine transcendence and the reality of the soul furnishes a particularly rich vision of the end of literature.

Related Topics

Chapter 43: Aesthetics; Chapter 47: Narrative; Chapter 50: Spirituality; Chapter 53: Irony; Chapter 54: The Meaning of Life

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45

MUSIC

John B. Foley, S. J.

Is there some reason to connect belief in an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good and loving God with the innate musicality of human beings? Atheism presumably would regard God or gods not only as specious but also entirely unrelated to human fascinations except in some fanciful way or other; ideology could link them, but not in real fact. In the present chapter I want to show not just the possibility of a reasonable and coherent connection between theism and music, but also the depth of such a relationship. This will not be a “proof” or argument for theism but, rather, a discussion that widens the understanding of music in its possible relations to theism.

I will confine my discussion to Christian theism, without implications about any other religion or system. I hope it will be useful for other theistic traditions and it will also assist non-theists in seeing how a philosophical tradition can find a link between music and its core belief.

My underlying premises will mainly agree with those found in many of the chapters of this book (especially Chapter 49 by Timothy Chappell): theism is not about deities but about God with a capital G; immanence and transcendence are necessary and compelling traits of the theistic view—that is, a view of an infinite but also intimate God, and so on.

The plan for this chapter is simple. I will point out a series of similarities or even direct connections between music and theism. I plan to begin with the more obvious ones and then lead up to a discussion of more profound factors.

Universality

The first conjunction of music and theism that I wish to remark is that both the appreciation for music and the belief in God are widespread and even universal. As for music, Oliver Sacks says this:

There is clearly a wide range of musical talent, but there is much to suggest there is an innate musicality in virtually everyone. This has been shown most clearly by the use of the Suzuki method to train young children, entirely by ear and by imitation, to play the violin. Virtually all hearing children respond to such training.

(Sacks 2007: 101)

It is true that Sacks also notes the seemingly complete absence of musicality in some individuals, a phenomenon he calls “amusia.” This includes the well-known impossibility for some people to “carry a tune”: this is sometimes called, irreverently, “a tin ear.” In Sacks’ words, such people “can veer off key without realizing it, or be unable to recog-

nize off-key singing by others" (Sacks 2007: 107). But he chastens this fact by citing the "broad neural correlates" involved in musical perception, as for instance the perception of rhythm or time intervals, as well as tone, pitch, timbre, loudness, tempo, rhythm, and contour (Sacks 2007: 153), to name a few. Some "amusical" people can possess one and lack the other. We see persons tapping their toe to music even though they could not sing or even reproduce a single note. Rhythm is possibly the most powerful element in bringing people together and binding them. "People can sing and dance together in every culture, and one can imagine them having done so around the first fires, a hundred thousand years ago" (Sacks 2007: 266). Maybe the tremendous, pounding pulses that boom from certain car stereos keep the driver from feeling alone!

However many kinds of exception there might be, it seems reasonable to say that human beings have universal access to one or the other of the numerous elements of music. We might say that most or even all people have a proclivity for music. A corollary is that it draws them powerfully together.

The search for God is also virtually universal in human beings. As Justin Barret points out: "We have no scientific or even directly observable evidence for God or minds, yet belief in both is extremely common and tenaciously held. Why? Because both arise from natural workings of the human mind" (Barret 2004: 108). This belief or seeking takes many forms, some of them not readily recognizable. Even as some people can go "off key" without ever realizing it, a large number of persons can perform an equivalent of going off key in their understanding of the presence of God. As Timothy Chappell observes, commenting on the work of Paul Veyne, the pre-Christian polytheism of the surrounding society produced "an ill-defined assortment of quirky, sinister, unpredictable, highly localized, and at best conditionally benign daemons" (Chappell, this volume, Chapter 49). Citing Veyne, Chappell further explains that Christian theism [and Judaism] present "a universal and omnipresent God of 'infinite mercy,' unconditionally compassionate 'about the fate of each and every human soul, including mine and yours,'" and offers, in the words of Veyne, "a mutual and passionate relationship of love and authority" (Chappell, this volume, Chapter 49, citing Veyne 2010: 23).

Why would there be such a widespread seeking for God, as posited by Augustine, Aquinas, Pascal, and Transcendental Thomists such as Rahner? I suggest here a thesis that comes from philosophy and theology. Unless one's consciousness is filled with someone or something, it is empty, a mere potency. As knowing beings, we must reach out for, and become one with, an other in the conscious realm, so that there will be content within our knowing apparatus. The remainder of the human task is then to appropriately separate oneself off from the other so that the result is not a fusion or a confusion of identities, but a union of two divergent entities.

But strangely, even filled with that "other," consciousness still quests and grasps for more, never satisfied until it finds the completion of its goal, perfect being: that which achieves the seeking. Whenever any person reaches out for another and is fulfilled (at least temporarily) by coming to oneness with the beloved other, he or she still has a residue of seeking for the perfect fulfillment of this desire that is inbuilt. The other person or thing, being limited and finite, cannot satisfy the infinitely open reservoir of consciousness in a human person. Only one being could conceivably do that, the one who is a perfect, unlimited being: God.

This urge for, this reaching out to, unlimited being, in the Augustinian vision of Christianity, is the basic goal of human consciousness. I might note the difference between "proving" the existence of such a being in something like the fashion of the

ontological argument of Anselm, on the one hand, and the fulfillment of an actual hunger, on the other. Of course, in Christian theology, a human being's nameless hunger for something unlimited (which turns out to be God) cannot be fulfilled except on the initiative of God. (In the interest of brevity, I am leaving the complications involving grace to one side here.)

I have presented thus far a simple sketch, far from complete, of the universality of music and of the desire for God. This is the first remarkable similarity between musicality and theism, and its roots seem deep.

Growing into Relationship

Second, the importance of growth, to which I just referred, is the next consideration. It is true of both theism and music that they necessarily must be learned over time. Why?

Music seems very much like "intellectualized emotion." It would take several books to establish such a premise, but this much can be said: neither intellect nor emotion by themselves can get at real music. Music meant mainly to arouse emotion takes us back to using it to feel a certain way. If analysis is its main purpose, as so many books of theory at least seem to imply, then again, we are dealing simply with an object, one that fits under our microscope. But intellectualized emotion has the resonance of full human attention. Not one of us is simply an emotion machine, or a thought structure. Attention to the rigorously imbued-with-purpose musical train of thought delights us because of its congruence with our knowing structure. Suzanne Langer likened any example of music or of any other art form to an organism, in which salient forces interact with one another, in progress to a purposive goal (Langer 1957: 47–50; also, 1953: 88–9). Thus the form of music cannot withstand abstraction from the actual sounds it shapes. Every living organism's shape is created precisely for and by its activities. Under this theory, the growth-goal of music-listening would be for the listener to attend more and more organically to the music itself, not to use it as a means to something else. Such listening requires education and development, but its reality is a great fulfillment.

Relationship to the God of theism can be described in much the same way. The person who wishes to answer the call to relationship from God will have to grow in living and in spiritual life. Obviously the first and beginning stage will have much to do with the child to parent type. True growth in spiritual life means learning gradually to "let go" of needs and exaggerated attachments and beginning to trust the divine. The *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius Loyola (1996 [1525]) have such a state as their main and perhaps only objective. They assume that, with the help of grace, praying persons can release their individuated attachments and come to an ever-widening surrender to the reality of God—as God is, rather than as helper and provider.

It is important to say again that, in the case of either music or spiritual life, the beginning stages are in no way to be abhorred and condemned. Everyone begins with them in both domains, and perhaps maintains these attitudes long after maturity has set in. It is not that there is something wrong with the outlook of beginners; it is, rather, that no one is meant to stay a beginner for life. Nonetheless, in relation to music and to God one is meant to maintain the childlike outlook alongside the adult one, on pain of becoming stuffy and brittle. In short, we supplant a purely childlike attitude with an adult's wisdom, all the while also preserving and cherishing the child's delight and openness. This is a developmental task for life.

Utilization

A third factor that music and godliness have in common is their proclivity to be used for other purposes. Not wrong or egregious, this kind of usage is, in fact, quite commonplace. But it does not represent the happiest outcome for either. Possibly the vast majority of times people hear music is when it is being utilized for something else. As to the “use” of God, one important book from the 1960s holds that religion is a sacred umbrella that keeps off the sometimes heavy rain of tension from marginal experiences such as birth, marriage, sickness, death, and so on. Religion utilizes God to give some safety to such events, and if they are covered in another way, religion itself dies (Berger 1967).

As is evident, this section will not be striving to give a positive impression about utilization, which does not form a superior way to treat either music or God. But it is obviously very important in our twenty-first-century experience anyway, and so must be addressed.

Utilization is far more prevalent than we ordinarily think. To put it another way, anyone can drive down a highway. Religions can. Hip-hop or rap music can proclaim sentiments that previously would have been thought anti-social. Evangelical music promotes relations with Jesus in something like the way popular music sings about loved ones. Chant music encourages contemplation: of God, or Nirvana, or self-realization, and so on. Classical symphonies can be paths to emotion mixed with intelligence. A popular song like John Lennon’s *Imagine* creates a soft, pleasant paean to one version of atheism (“Imagine there’s no Heaven, It’s easy if you try, No hell below us, Above us only sky”). Or the very popular religious song, “Amazing Grace,” is a convincing ode to God’s saving presence (“When we’ve been here ten thousand years Bright shining as the sun, We’ve no less days to sing God’s praise Than when we first begun”). What a variety of vehicles on this highway.

Then there is the act of going to the symphony. Many people find that listening to a symphony draws them away from the trials of everyday life. A person might make this statement: “I love *La Mer* by Debussy because it makes me feel like I am at the ocean-side, with all the waves and the long, long water. It looks so peaceful.” This reaction might be typical of many or most people at a concert, enjoying the sensations and images that music leads them to, in the same way an afternoon breeze, or a comfortable couch might. Crude as it seems to say, this experience can be characterized as a “utilization,” music as a means. This is also true of the somewhat popular practice of gaining knowledge about the composer through the music he or she writes. Vivaldi’s music is often bright and cheerful, therefore we must be able to deduce that Vivaldi was a cheerful man. Beethoven must have had a lot of anger (maybe because of his deafness?) since he has a lot of accented, sometimes explosive music. The truth of these deductions is not the issue. The point is that they amount to using music as a highway leading to something else besides the music.

In the secular world, volumes of music are written for directly pragmatic purposes, as for instance music for commercials. These are use-oriented, designed to goad workers or customers onto an action or a product. The same happens more subtly in “background music,” to which the general public often attaches the name “muzak” (found in elevators, department stores, workplaces, for instance). And what about popular music, with its concentration on sales and attraction? Often pop music tilts all the way to what we might call manipulation, that is, the practice of seeming to be one thing (presentation of a naturally attractive phenomenon) but being another (an influence on people to buy certain specified products or to think in a particular way—*always without their awareness*).

And there is the popular idea of music as self-expression. One popular rap artist, Bohemia, pointed to his “life of drugs, police chase, mafia, drama, depression, confusion *that reflects in my music*” (quoted on www.indianexpress.com, Nov. 29, 2010, *italics mine*). “Self-expression” came to the fore in the twentieth century as the “new” meaning of all creativity. Particularly in the United States, where individualism holds sway, classical music took a road toward being simply the self-revelation of a composer—and also of the audience, who enjoy freedom from formal restraints, especially the rigid distinction between themselves and the performers. Freedom is a central value in such a view, release from the strictures of the past, of rules, of tradition, of culture. The pronoun “I” plays a central part in such an understanding, qualifying it as a “post-modern” phenomenon. Unfortunately, this theory limits artistic products to the individual and his/her utterances. This way of thinking has great popularity and in some ways leads to a community of interest (as on Facebook or Twitter), but notice that it leads not to the music but to the state of the composer, who is utilizing the sounds to proclaim his freedom.

Another approach along the same lines was brought by John Cage, who once said in a seminar at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto, 1978, that he felt sorry for the performers, either the soloists or the members of the orchestra. They have to sit with blank expressions on their faces, he thought, and play only when specifically instructed by the composer to do so. The poor audience has to (miraculously) ignore the coughs of their fellows, the rustling of cellophane around a cough drop, the sirens going by, the snoring, and so on, in order to pretend that the only thing they hear is music. The more humane manner of entertainment, Cage said, would be to free both the entertainer and the audience to enjoy the real sounds of daily life. Cage’s composition “4:33” is the perfect example. A pianist walks on stage, closes the piano lid, clicks a stop watch, and sits in silence with the audience for four minutes and thirty-three seconds. Sounds are everywhere, both human and mechanical. At the end of that time the pianist turns off the stop watch, opens the piano lid, and exits the stage. This is the interpretation of music as ordinary, everyday noises. In the seminar Cage said that he loves “the activity of sound,” “sound that doesn’t mean anything,” sound that has “an outer, not an inner.” This is an innovative approach, but still far from the wonder so many people have experienced as the human content of traditional music. Maybe it is not straight utilization but, rather, an innovation that takes the place of music.

I do not mean to chastise any of these ways of utilizing music. They are what they are. But none of them arrive at music itself, the beauty of the actual music. Whenever music is a method to arrive at something else, whether legitimately or not, it leaves the listener one step removed from the direct and wholehearted encounter that is possible.

Which brings us to theism. The refined and experienced goal in life is to know others in their own right instead of filtering them only through one’s own need structure. Imagine what it would be like to be known only as a fulfillment of other people’s wants. All persons have a reality of their own that transcends the needs of their friends, parents, children, wife, husband, and other relationships. There is a craving in each of us to be known and valued as we are. This might not happen frequently, or ever, in life, but yearn for it we do, and true peace comes only when such a relation is in place. So, in this chapter, I take it as fundamental that the correlation between music and theism must be based on the truest kind of relationship, which is not one of utilization but of loving interest.

What do human relationships tell us about theism? Utilization is frequent. There is a widespread practice of many Christian believers to, unconsciously, use God for their

own purposes. A beginner is encouraged to take a dependent stance toward God. You have needs, God can fill them. Even Jesus called God his Father, and the role of a father is to aid and teach and defend his children. God is to save us, to be our “rock,” to fill the void that the world in which we live creates. This wonderful and time honored usage of God even carries over to the Lord’s Prayer. “Give us this day our daily bread,” after all, has a need-oriented goal, to get food, whether it be material or spiritual.

A problem arises for this viewpoint when requests seem to be ignored by the father-God. Very popular in our day are questions such as, “how could God let such a thing happen to my family?” Or, “how could an all-loving God allow such suffering in a child?” I have no desire to minimize the dreadfulness of human suffering, which raises the problem of evil in heartbreaking ways. This powerful problem cannot be addressed in passing in a brief chapter on theism and music, and nothing about my point here should be taken as a comment on the problem. For my purposes here, as I said at the outset, I am assuming that the God of theism is perfectly good and loving, and that the existence of human suffering, in all of its dreadfulness, is somehow compatible with the existence of that God. What is at issue for me here is not an attempt at theodicy but only a sketch of the differing human attitudes towards God possible to human beings in their needs and desires.

The fact is, in any case, belief in God can begin to falter when it seems that God does not act like a father after all but more like a distant relative who cannot be bothered to communicate. Conversion is strongly needed when we realize the dreadfulness of suffering and death, especially in loved ones. In Christianity, the event of Jesus’ cross could become an answer to such predicaments by subverting or at least adjudicating the question itself. In the crudest formulation that question is, “Why doesn’t God give me what I want?” But then a Copernican revolution can take place. Instead of having the sun circle around the earth, or in this case, the fathering God circle around the believer, fixing hurts, picking up the dregs, making everything alright, in an adult status, we begin to see that the earth is really rotating around the sun. God is the great one and our lives are meant to encircle His, allowing no other value to supersede that of God. In Christianity the cross stands as the ultimate example of such valuing. Rather than choose his own comfort and longer life, Jesus says, “Father, not my will but your will be done.”

Growth, together with the consideration of this crucifixion event, gradually forces an adult status upon the believer, one in which the universe and everything in it—especially the human beings—receive their fill because they give their whole selves to their creator. This does not wipe out the childlike dependence, it accompanies it (as an adult does a child), supplying the grown-up knowledge that decisions have consequences and that the adult’s job is to make those decisions and to live with the results. Adulthood contains the hope and exquisite possibility of being a mature human being who is not more important than a God who becomes in effect subservient, but just the opposite.

Even as music in its purest form is meant to be heard and attended to as its own self rather than a means, so is theism meant to offer God in his own right instead of always filtered through our own need structure. The fact that utilization leads away from this form rather than toward it pushes this chapter on to another section.

Depth-Relationship, Where and How it Happens

Fourth, I have begun to speak of relationship, both in music and in theism. A listener pays humble attention to what is being performed, and the music for its part receives

its being from the hearer. The reason for this last statement is that music is much more than just vibrations in the air. To be a coherent whole it must enter into human consciousness, where the shaped physical pulsations receive their being as music. Similarly, the God of the Bible is continually seeking relationship with human beings. It is not that theism's God craves human persons in order to be fulfilled or realized, it is that *the relationship* with God needs human beings who have opened themselves to God's presence.

Where and how do these relationships happen? How is it possible for a close union to take place between a human being and either music or God? Here are some of the conundrums: how can music be both intellectual and emotional? How can my self-interest concerning God or music be put aside in favor of some rarefied special awareness? Why should relationship be given such a special track, perhaps casting the individual aside? In short, "depth-relationship" forms the subject for this fourth consideration.

Accompanying the scientific bent of today's world, there comes a popular but unacknowledged bias toward knowledge as simply an assembly line. The object reflects photons (in the case of sight), then the lens of the eye processes them, the optic nerve carries their electrical impulses to the brain, which does its part by acting on them, either giving or finding structure within them, and the final result is achieved: an image. Obviously I cannot adequately debate such a fundamental philosophical question in this short chapter. But I can take exception to the assembly line notion of anything human. No human process, including especially knowing and loving, can be so one-sided. On the contrary, poets argue for the word "depth" in human knowledge. To spell it out, I am suggesting that a better way of understanding knowledge—and artistic knowledge in particular—will be to refer to various depths of knowing. At the deepest one, union between human beings has its roots. I posit the following:

There is a secret center in the depths of human beings,
where music and God are received,
and where human relationship with each is accomplished.

The word "secret" might sound fanciful, but there is no better word to describe it. Instead of a unilinear process based on material operations, the composer's experience is of layers of consciousness, of which the topmost consists of clear and distinct knowledge, while the deepest reveals a kind of non-explicit or pre-conscious awareness that lurks beneath specific knowledge, founding it and rooting it. Often a listener asks a composer what he or she was trying to say in a piece of music. The only answer possible turns out to be simple. "I have already said it." A composer is "trying to say" something that is hidden and that slowly works its way out and becomes the composition. Thoughts concerning a symphony issue from the mind, clearly and distinctly. But the real source of the symphony is most assuredly un- or pre-conscious, and it is secret. Thought is not welcome. At the point of conception the germ cannot be shared even with one other human person, on pain of dragging it untimely through its intended gestation. There is, in other words, a *clandestine consciousness* within every human being. It is a kind of conceiving that derives from the mingling of the perceived with the pre-conscious of the composer. All the perceptual powers are present in their undifferentiated roots down in the mysterious depths.

To get an idea of it, let us look first at poetry, since its origin is a bit easier to grasp, and then go onto music. Who knows what kind of attention the poet Keats gave to a

vase decorated with scenes from Greece—maybe just a glance. But somehow, something happened. A union took place. The vase or urn made a subterranean home for itself within him. He and it were joined. If at that moment the poet had turned back to analyze what was happening inside him, the poem would have been stillborn. Scrutiny takes place in the differentiated power of conceptualization. Instead, the momentary union happens at the root of the artist and now begins to gestate—long, long before the poet knows anything about it. The process might take weeks, or years, or days or hours. Or minutes, for that matter. But the result is Keats' famous poem, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," from 1819. If there were any way possible to view it, *per impossible*, from inside the artist, we would surely see a gradual articulation of what will be parts of the unified poem. In any case, the simple urn turns into something that can be addressed in the following, not everyday words:

THOU still unravish'd bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of Silence and slow Time . . .

Keats has married the vase, figuratively speaking; has seen (or supplied) its quiet progress through time till the poem's present moment. This address to the urn will not fit under a microscope, but poetry lovers would argue that it provides much more truth than science could.

Or, imagine a hawk glimpsed by the Jesuit poet, Hopkins; just a bird in flight but from the poet's depths to the final expression on paper, it becomes a "dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon" (Gerard Manley Hopkins, "The Windhover"). The sound of the bird's flight is echoed in the sound of these words.

The union of the artist with the object does itself *become* the work of art, as opposed to "causing" it. When the work is born into the world, the composer and the audience both hope it will be a living, breathing organism. If this happens, the poem or the song can reach down deep into the hearer and invite him or her into its world, a world that, if not corrupted by mere "use," can support animate relationship with the human being who listens to it. We will see in a moment the slightly more complicated union of the composer with the world.

A theism of worth will also posit a God who not only cares about people, but who comes into union with them. Instead of use, this will be a relation of life to life: God's life to the individual person's life (not leaving out the community, of course). Theism is able to posit a God who is spiritual, animate, and relational and therefore capable of the most profound union with whoever is able to enter into that union. The doctrine of the Trinity is a prime example. Christian theism believes in a plurality of "persons" within the divine being, who, because of their perfection of being, are able to come into total union with each other without erasing the differences. Volumes would be needed to back up this claim, but in itself it is a simple restatement of the belief and the experience of Christians. But how does this God relate to human beings? The place of union in a person is found in the very same intuitive openness in which music originates. Without human "pre-conscious" or "subconscious," God would have to remain external to a person, or else devise supernatural causation that influences the person but leaves intimate union unachieved. In theism, God's Spirit, called the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, is able to achieve something resembling the union present among the persons of the Trinity, only this time within the human being. "We are temples of the Holy Spirit," says Paul the Apostle. This union takes place at the initiative of God. It is

an act of gracious love and involves a subtle invitation that the individual can ignore or even refuse, but also can accept by means of subtle yet love-filled actions. In this, God's initiative is like any offer of love: it can be either refused or accepted. God's Holy Spirit is able to enter at the root of a person, a root that is identical to the pre-conscious where music puts down its roots. Here is more than just a similarity between music and Godly presence. They both seek the same depths in a human being.

A last detail: what happens when the Holy Spirit, which is God, comes into a kind of union with the deep spirit of a human being? What are the results? Does it tell that person what to do? Does it prevent mistakes? Does it have a plan which the individual is "meant" to carry out, and to which it guides him or her? I want to speculate that there is a far more important job that God's Spirit does. It has much in common with mysticism. It is a deep, covert experience of God, but not a conscious one that can be described and carried out like a strategy. It is an interior fecundation, similar to the conception of a baby. It gestates and grows in its own time, and just as artistic growth issues forth into a work of art, the Godly fertilization develops into a full human life, at one with other lives, and fully the free property of the person who lives it.

God and Music as Dynamism

Fifth, and most profound, both musical inspiration and the Spirit of God show up as what could be called "dynamics" within the inner person. Movements of the world and of God are dynamic.

What is the world's dynamic with which music is concerned? Much less obvious than we saw with poetry is the relation of musical inspiration to the things of the daily world. After all, if music were simply an accompaniment or illustration of observed life, then it would turn into the very attitude that I have insisted is not the main subject of this chapter: use-oriented music. In the history of painting objects have been re-presented—not for the sake of dull repetition, but because these beloved objects wed the artistic soul of the painter and emerge not as photo-realistic, but as artistic visions. For most of its life, painting has aimed at this goal. But music would surely lose its soul if it were "realistic" in this way. Granted, there is what we call "program music," the story of *Romeo and Juliet* (Tchaikovsky), or of *Lieutenant Kijé* (Prokofiev), for example. But if abstraction is a rather new development in painting, it has been the heart of music as long as we can remember. Most music is not "about" something; it is itself.

Then in what way can music's creativity represent a marriage of the artist with the world? I will echo Langer in saying that music abstracts certain dynamisms of human life from their surroundings. This means simple attention to certain aspects; the ones that music can take unto itself; the ones that have impressed themselves on the pre-conscious. To say it simply, the musician's deep consciousness has witnessed and knows all about the tensions and movements of human life—physical, emotional or intellectual—and it renders them as musical realities (see, for example, Langer 1950: 220–33; 1953: 107–13; 1957: 39ff.).

To be more particular, music represents images of passage. This is one of the most interesting facets of human experience: progression from one experience to the other. Nothing stays the same, some people might say, but of course life is an experience of stability plus change, both. This interplay is the thrill of life. What change do I mean? For example, we become mature. We become both the child, happy, thrilled with what our elders see as "small things," and also the adult who finds childhood too

small, unfitting to the life they have grown into. Our transition involves many major and minor changes. What registers with the musician is not the “fact” of change or the description of it, but the experience of it. All transitions—from a quiet room to loud and confusing conversation; the sudden realization that age has taken away (slowly, ponderously) the energy and excitement of youth; the loss by a boxer of a qualification round which transforms him from a vigorous contender to a discarded *non-entity*; the circadian rhythm of daily life, in which I can do in late afternoon what I could not in the early morning; the foot on the brake pedal when I finally see the red light—all these are “passages,” and they are the stuff of music.

I must clarify immediately. The composer is not trying to cause the listener to think of the events themselves. The point is that a composer has ingested the dynamic of the life of the material world, and has allowed its energy to take form as motion in the specifically musical world. The movements of human life, particularly those of passage from one state to another, are a satisfactory description of music’s primary reality: development. (Minimalist music seems to directly contradict this statement, but it is instead an extended version of it.) In its development, music is animate. It is an organism with a central core and a cohesion that has grown out of the original conception.

It is similar concerning the presence of the Holy Spirit. It can be compared with the dynamics of passage received at important moments by the composer. The spiritual union of person with the Spirit is not explicit, not an awareness, not a conscious encounter. It is an infinitely restrained urging that forms a non-coercive union with the person, respecting his or her longing, searching, reaching out and desiring, but giving the person at the same time an extra impetus or quiet presence that affords a boost to the seeking for God that is already in place. It is like the way old friends can sometimes be together even for long periods of time without saying a word, completely without discomfort, in a communication that is beyond words, a quiet that is shared. So the presence of God in the Spirit is a peaceful, personal accompanying. Of course the world and other persons are involved also, since no person is without relationship to others.

Especially is such union present in times of loss and grief, suffering, and the temptation to give up, as Peter Berger noted (see Berger 1967). It is present in the kind of dryness that Mother Teresa of Calcutta seems to have experienced for the last fifty years of her life. Why did not God console her? We cannot know. What we do know is that her life continued to show forth the kind of love that will not give up, that will extend its life for its friends. In other words, she lived the complete life of oneness with the theistic God, but minus the “sacred canopy” of consolation. The merging of the Spirit of God with a person in the deep, non-explicit consciousness is a profoundly personal event, even as the inspiration for music is.

The theistic God is thus present in the same locale in which the germ of music is present. God is, then, in a certain way, an intimate, pre-conscious companion of music that comes forth from the same humanity where the Holy Spirit dwells. There could not be a more important and intimate relationship between theism and music than this co-presence.

Conclusion

In order to arrive at a significant common ground between music and theism, it has been necessary to dig all the way down to a sub- or pre-consciousness that cannot be described, only uttered in a work of art or in a life lived in the fullness of love. Of course

it is necessary at some point to conclude considerations such as these with a return to the material circumstances where each example of such performances takes place. The music cannot exist without being played, and, contrary to Cage, it must be played or at least initiated by musicians. God and his Holy Spirit come to believers in the midst of ritual, that is to say, in Mass and other liturgical experiences. From there the Spirit remains within the person, who carries it out to the world.

Without having room for such deliberations, I want to end on one short thought. Is the consciousness of a human person capable of receiving either the Godly presence, or for that matter, the profound depths of music? Can we, who are imperfect and variously talented people, really hope to achieve such heights? We venture to say that there are indeed reverberations of the above encounters in some privileged experiences of music, and in moments of daily, graced life lived to its fullest.

I would like to enter a direct description of this presence at the deepest level, the very one that I have been saying could not be described. And indeed it cannot. But it can be conveyed, as the poet Rabindranath Tagore does in this poem:

“What is there but the sky, O Sun, that can hold thine image?”

“I dream of thee, but to serve thee I can never hope,” the dewdrop wept and said, “I am too small to take thee unto me, great lord, and my life is all tears.”

“I illumine the limitless sky, yet I can yield myself up to a tiny drop of dew,” thus the Sun said; “I shall become but a sparkle of light and fill you, and your little life will be a laughing orb.”

(Tagore 1913–71: Poem LXII, 166)

Related Topics

Chapter 4: Christianity; Chapter 11: Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Intellectual Life; Chapter 28: Arguments from Evil; Chapter 43: Aesthetics; Chapter 44: Literature; Chapter 49: History and Experience

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Recommended Reading

- Abel, A. (1957) *Talks with Great Composers: Candid Conversations with Brahms, Puccini, Strauss, and Others*, New York: Citadel Press. Purporting to be accurate interviews with great composers, written down later from memory; the talk with Brahms is particularly relevant to the present topic.

MUSIC

- Blackwell, A. (1999) *The Sacred in Music*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press. Presents first an appreciation of the musical tradition of the West and then of the sacramental traditions of the Christian church, with the essence of each rooted in human souls.
- Brown, F. B. (2000) *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste: Aesthetics in Religious Life*, New York: Oxford University Press. Emphasizes the importance of music to religious worship, but also the wider use of musical creativity outside the church, especially commercially.
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- Foley, J. (1994) *Creativity and the Roots of Liturgy*, Portland, OR: Pastoral Press. An extensive treatment of the philosophy of artistic creation, and application of these ideas to liturgy through Trinitarian principles.
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- Stump, E. (2007) "Beauty as a Road to God," *Sacred Music* 134, 4: 11–24. An expert tracing of the manner in which beauty (especially in artistic works) is a path to belief in and experience of God.

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FILM

R. Douglas Geivett

Though widely considered a secularizing sedative, contemporary film reveals that God is making a comeback. Secularism is a cultural malaise reflecting the attitude that God, if God even bothers to exist, is irrelevant. But there are signs that God is still very much on the minds of filmmakers and film audiences. This chapter explores several ways in which filmmakers have wrestled with the concepts and commitments of theism. We begin with questions about the nature of theism and film. This is followed by a discussion of *narrative rationality* as applied to film. We then turn to concrete examples of the ways film has framed God.

What is theism? What is film?

Theism holds that God is the fundamental, self-subsistent reality, the eternal, perfectly free and loving, all-wise and omnipotent creator of the universe, which continues to exist by God's sustaining power and is the arena of meticulous providence and of special divine action (i.e., miracles). It follows that God is a bodiless personal agent, and the perfectly good ground of moral responsibility, whose will is fully worthy of creaturely obedience. In wisdom, God created a universe fit for human habitation and flourishing, both physical and spiritual. Human persons bear the imprint of God's own nature, as reflected in their capacities for self-determination, rational judgment, morally significant action, and interpersonal relationship (i.e., the *imago dei*). Human nature is therefore understood in terms of this derivation of creaturely dignity, and the values pertaining to human flourishing coordinate with the will of God, which God reveals to human conscience in various ways. A correct description of the human predicament is diagnosed in terms of failure in relationship with God, a breach of fellowship with God due to willful disobedience to God, which issues in a breakdown in the conditions of human flourishing at every level. Only what can restore fellowship with God can fully remedy the human predicament.

We see in this description of theism a conceptual framework defined by a set of propositions that have deep existential significance. A worldview purports that the world is a certain way. But associated with every worldview is a *form of life*. A worldview can be seen, then, as a kind of script for the circumstances of life. It informs our perspective on life's problems, delineates the range of meaningful choices available to an individual, shapes community solidarity, identifies values and arranges them in order of priority, envisions the good life along particular lines, and so on. A worldview is taken up with countless vicissitudes of the human condition.

Film is a storytelling medium that depends especially on moving images of human

actors and now generally includes audible dialogue, sound effects, and a musical score. The so-called formal properties of a film (the casting and the script, the cinematography and the score, the camera-work, lighting, and edited sequencing) give that film's narrative the story structure that it has. Film's influence, today, far outstrips the dominion of its narrative cousins. The sights and sounds of film engage viewers in experiences they would not otherwise have, and after a fashion that is unique in the realm of storytelling. Its unique power is due to numerous converging factors, including its exploitation of technological wizardry, the cult status of movie stars, the worldwide distribution of its products, etc. And, like any storytelling medium, film has the capacity to depict and particularize the elements of a worldview.

Screenwriting instructor Robert McKee believes that today's film audience "is already a genre expert." He warns screenwriters that they must work with and around audience expertise, making sure, first, to fulfill audience expectations, and, second, to "lead their expectations to fresh, unexpected moments" (McKee 1997: 80). He attributes the expertise of today's film audience to "a lifetime of moviegoing" (*ibid.*). Whereas my generation grew up *with* movies, today's emerging adults have grown up *on* movies. With the advent of VHS tapes in 1976, and then DVDs in 1997, consumers were finally able to *own* the movies they watched. And thus they became a different kind of consumer. Total consumption of a particular film is now occasioned by repeated viewings of the film, in whole or in part. The narrative thread of a film can be kept before the mind while listening to the film's score on a CD or MP3 file. Home entertainment systems rival the technological sophistication of movie theatres. And thus films and their stories are assimilated more deeply into the psyches of individuals and more directly tincture the values and directives of culture.

Films, then, are cultural artifacts that reflect enduring cultural trends and move culture along new experimental trajectories. Their pervasiveness has fostered a narrative approach to life, where individuals and societies are themselves perceived as stories. As with any narrative, our stories have a propositional structure. The propositions constitutive of our many stories stand in various logical relations, and they are more or less compelling depending on their internal coherence and apparent aptness vis-à-vis reality. But, as explained in the next section, narrative has its own appeal as a tool of persuasion.

The Narrative Paradigm and Narrative Rationality

Communication theorist Walter Fisher has argued that all communication is narration. Further, human agents orient themselves to the world in terms of story; they organize their lives in relation to the narrative structure of the world in which they live. Thus, they appropriate the elements of storytelling and make decisions and act within a narrative framework (see Fisher 1984). Fisher's thesis is illuminating, and the contribution of film to theistic commitment can be understood best if we consider the narrative propensities of human beings and the way storytelling enters into our deliberations, emotions, actions, and commitments.

For Fisher, *Homo sapiens* is also *Homo narrans*. Our penchant for storytelling runs deep within our nature as human beings. We are rational creatures for whom story is a basic way of navigating reality. And there is a peculiar logic to narrative rationality. This contrasts with the "rational-world paradigm," as Fisher calls the logo-centric approach to rationality. Julia Wood explains:

If we accept the rational world epistemological position, then evidence and reasoning alone should guide what we believe and do. Values, emotional arguments, and aesthetic considerations should make no difference in what we believe and do. If we adopt the epistemology of the narrative paradigm, however, then a compelling story is the basis of our beliefs and actions. Within the narrative paradigm, values, beliefs, and actions are assumed to be influenced by emotional arguments and by aesthetic matters such as verbal style and dramatic flourishes.

(Wood 2004: 107).

Stories are important rhetorical devices that can be effective tools of persuasion. So, for example, our verdict that this or that film is “compelling” reflects a degree of resonance a film has for us as a picture of reality. In our evaluations of film we are making judgments about reality. The criteria used in our evaluations differ from those of conventional logic and reasoning. Fisher identified two criteria of assessment at work in narrative rationality: coherence and fidelity.

Narrative coherence is a function of how the elements of a story fit together. This is an internal constraint on narrative plausibility. The story must be believable. It might be highly imaginative and discontinuous with the experienced world in certain respects, but it must represent a way things might be or might have been. The envisioned world of the story must have a logical structure, even if the world it describes is logically odd in comparison with the actual world.

Fidelity is determined by “the extent to which a story resonates with listeners’ personal experiences and beliefs” (Fisher, cited in Wood 2004: 109). “According to narrative theorists,” says Julia Wood,

we find stories believable when they are consistent with experiences in our lives, and we find characters believable when they act as we do or as we would like to see ourselves acting. If you’ve ever felt irrelevant to the world, then you can identify with Willie Loman in *Death of a Salesman*. If you see yourself as an adventurer, who boldly goes into new territories, then you may identify with many of the characters in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* . . . Judgments of fidelity, then, may differ according to personal experience and standpoint.

(Ibid.: 109–10)

Judged in terms of “heuristic power,” Fisher’s narrative conception of rationality is useful. Beliefs—our doxastic commitments—are reinforced, challenged, and revised as a result of our imaginative engagement with the films we watch. Much of this dynamic happens below the surface of consciousness as we become absorbed in the narrative of a film. Subtle shifts in belief might occur as we give ourselves over to a film and let it have its way with us. Sympathetic characters enable us to lower our critical guard and feel and experience life along with them. In some cases, we might so identify with a character that we wish we could be that person. Some men, for example, enthralled with the 007 phenomenon, would like to be James Bond. They don’t want to be his sidekick (does James Bond even have a sidekick?). They want to be the guy who charms the ladies, deals lethal blows to nefarious fiends in hand-to-hand combat, and is so attired and technologically equipped that he is ready for whatever dangers or opportunities cross his path.

There can be little doubt that films have persuasive power—as do well-crafted narratives generally. The components of a worldview can be made more or less attractive through its depiction in film. Worldview attitudes and commitments are frequently attributed to film characters. Presented a certain way, a film's characters might serve as attractive or repulsive exemplars of the worldviews they represent. Even characters as vicious as Hannibal Lecter (*Silence of the Lambs*), Michael Corleone (*Godfather I, II, and III*), Henry and Tommy (*The Goodfellas*), and Claus von Bulow (*Reversal of Fortune*) can be presented as “fascinating,” if not sympathetic (see Seger 1992: 128). The Joker, as portrayed in *The Dark Knight*, can be viewed as a quasi-sympathetic figure, when played by a cinematic icon like Heath Ledger.

Let us now consider how the worldview of theism is exhibited, commended, or challenged in a few noteworthy films of the past ten years.

A Sheriff's Sobering Soliloquy

“I always figured God would sort of come into my life in some way. He didn't. I don't blame him. If I was him, I'd have the same opinion about me that he does.” This is Sheriff Ed Tom Bell (played by Tommy Lee Jones) lamenting his failure to catch the bad guy in the Joel and Ethan Coen film *No Country for Old Men* (2007). The comment comes late in the film, and surprises, initially, because there is no other reference to God in the movie. The sheriff displays no religious affect at any other time during the course of events. So why now?

Arguably, during this late scene, the film suddenly achieves an honesty it has not yet conveyed. Our word “sympathy” derives from the Greek word *sympatheia*, meaning “feeling together” (*pathos* + *syn*) or “fellow feeling.” In estimating the value of a film, we often consider whether the primary characters are “sympathetic characters.” With the sheriff's lament, we find ourselves able to relate more deeply to Sheriff Ed Tom Bell. We've been prepared for this moment by the agreeable example set by the sheriff in pursuit of justice despite personal risk. He has exhibited unselfish concern for the welfare of others. We admire this about him. But our admiration intensifies, it takes on a more compelling quality, when he reveals that his concern is driven by a deep regard for justice and the anguish of seeing evildoers get away with their heinous acts. This anguish is rooted in Bell's beliefs about God. And this makes sense to us. We feel an affinity for the sheriff's disillusionment. Bell articulates what we might have been feeling all along—that God is strangely, inexplicably absent (see Card 2011).

Such affinity is a directorial achievement. A film as dark as *No Country for Old Men* risks leaving its audience cold. But here, as the film draws to a close, Sheriff Bell brings us in close by articulating our own painful experience—when evil strikes, we are alerted to a deep aloneness we feel more subliminally much of the time. It is an aloneness defined by the experience of God's absence. (See Geivett 2003 on the idea of “experiencing God's absence.”)

Bell's sobering soliloquy provides belated insight into his emotional and spiritual constitution. It could well be an interpretive key to the movie as a whole. The sheriff's lament spills out in expression of deep disillusionment over the pervasiveness of evil in the world. His brooding betrays a sense of personal failure. Though he's dedicated a lifetime to fighting crime and the pursuit of justice, he believes now that his efforts have been completely ineffectual. His latest case, portrayed by the horrific events of this bleak film, represents for him a career—and hence a life—full of futility. The bad guy

gets away. And, reinforcing the sentiment of futility, we know, better than Bell does, how close his capture or demise had sometimes been.

Bell links his sense of personal failure to his perception of God's absence. In truth, the man is conflicted. He says, "I always figured God would come into my life." But in review of his life, he confesses that he's really not surprised that "he didn't." It's clear that he feels like a failure. Does he believe that he has failed because God never showed up? He doesn't say so. Rather, he seems to believe that his personal failures are his own fault and that these somehow explain why God has kept his distance.

It would be pointless to inquire about the source of Bell's peculiar theology. But we can describe a few of its features. God is a personal being. God sometimes enters into the lives of human persons, but God does so selectively. God does not accommodate all of those who, after some fashion or other, desire God's presence in their lives. On the other hand, God is not arbitrary about who does and who does not experience his presence. Some are worthy, presumably because they are good and decent people, or because they are successful in their respective vocations. You can never be sure, until you come to the end of your life, that God will not eventually show up for you. And all of this is consistent with God's justice. God is very big on justice. His other attributes are subordinate to this. There is, also, the hint—reinforced by the larger context of the film—that the arena of human activity is governed by forces larger than the human agents themselves, and that the trajectory of a person's life is more or less foreordained. If this is so, there's no point in complaining about it. And though God exists and acts justly, the details of this remain a mystery, especially since palpable evil so often prevails.

So, though the sheriff's remarks come late, they suggest that the film is very much about God's general absence and God's permission of heinous evils. But the precise form in which Sheriff Bell expresses his consternation leaves us with several substantive questions: (1) Under what conditions would God be willing to make his presence known in the lives of individuals? (2) What counts as evidence that God is absent? (3) If God were to show himself, what would it look like? (4) Is it right to expect God to reveal himself to individuals? (5) What responsibilities, if any, do human persons have if they desire relationship with God? (6) How is knowledge of God's existence (or at least belief that God exists) related to a more personal relationship with God? (7) Can a person believe that God exists, or even know that God exists, and yet fail to experience God in a more personal manner? (8) Is "divine hiddenness" evidence that God does not exist? The list could be extended.

Sheriff Bell's inadequate theism differs in important respects from the theism outlined earlier in this chapter. In the more robust theistic worldview, while it is true that God is just, God also is perfectly loving. And as the perfectly loving being that he is, God desires relationship with human persons. This matters more to God than mere belief that God exists. Paul Moser proposes that this explains why "spectator evidence" for the existence of God—or the evidence that figures so prominently in traditional arguments for the existence of God—does not *compel* belief. God would not force himself on anyone, and so would not make his presence known with such obviousness that it would hardly be possible to disbelieve. If belief in God were produced strictly along such lines, the possibility of divine-human fellowship would be compromised. Nevertheless, there is, says Moser, another kind of evidence that is "purposely available" to the one who seeks God, evidence that serves God's own purposes in the interests of divine-human fellowship (see Moser 2009). This evidence is also conditionally available; only those who would welcome such fellowship with God have access to it. Thus, the evidence is

volitionally available. And to will God's brand of fellowship with himself is to submit one's own will to God, to welcome the fulfillment of God's will in one's own life, come what may. If God, a perfectly loving being who is utterly worthy of worship, exists, then this is a better description of how God's presence would come to be known on a personal level. The evidence available under these conditions, says Moser, is superior to spectator evidence in several ways, not least of which is that it is "conclusive," because it issues in direct confirmation through personal transformation in relationship with a loving God and is not subject to potential defeaters. This is evidence that Sheriff Bell does not have.

Almighty Schmuck

In another film, this one a comedy, Bruce Nolan (played by Jim Carrey) also has issues with God and God's absence. In *Bruce Almighty* (directed by Tom Shadyac 2003), Nolan is a nice guy TV reporter in Buffalo, NY, who simply can't take it anymore. He's weary of playing second fiddle to the egomaniacal news anchor, Evan Baxter (Steve Carell). Bruce blames God for permitting the injustice. "The only one around here not doing his job is *You!*" he screams at God. He pleads for a sign of God's concern. And he is so consumed with his demands that, when God does answer, Bruce is oblivious.

He might well be called "Bruce the obtuse," for it takes quite some time for Bruce to allow himself even to entertain the possibility that God has responded to his entreaties. His girlfriend, Grace (Jennifer Aniston), has a childlike faith in the reality and goodness of God. She doesn't require more or better evidence. Bruce, on the other hand, stipulates such standards of evidence that even he is practically unable to recognize the reality they indicate when the evidence is provided. But the movie is not really about the existence of God. It has far more to do with the nature of God and with typical human attitudes toward God in light of life's challenges.

Once God has Bruce's attention, his demand for God to set things right is addressed. God provides Bruce with the considerable powers of divinity and invites Bruce to use these powers to make things right himself. God sets down two restrictions, however. Bruce is not to tell others of this temporary arrangement, and he's not permitted to violate the free will of others.

It's no surprise that Bruce applies his new powers to selfish (and ridiculous) ends: Grace is suddenly endowed with an increased bust-size that pleases them both, his incontinent dog takes to using the toilet, traffic is halted when he crosses the street. In the category of *über*-ridiculous, Bruce parts the tomato soup in his lunch bowl and later lassos the moon and drags it in close to the balcony where he romances his girlfriend. But most important, Bruce exploits his powers to improve his reputation at work and be promoted above his nemesis. Though Bruce is favored with divine power, he still behaves as the crude, petty, vindictive person he was before.

In due course, Bruce learns that divine power unaccompanied by divine wisdom has its downside. When Bruce lassos the moon, he fails to consider its effect on the tides and does not anticipate the tidal wave produced by his impulsive act. He thinks he can say "yes" to everyone's prayerful supplications, as they come flooding in. But this leads to chaos, and Bruce begins to doubt his cleverness. Bruce might have Godlike power, but he lacks Godlike wisdom. And so his power is a dubious advantage. This scenario frames several interesting dimensions of theism and invites reconsideration of some human expectations of God.

It is especially interesting to note God's interaction with Bruce, and the things Bruce learns through this interaction. Bruce imagines, like so many skeptics today, that God could have (would have?) made a better world than the actual world. It is not unusual to hear skeptics say that if they had God's power they would create an altogether different world. They mean, of course, that it would be a *better* world. This, in effect, is Bruce Nolan's attitude. And the film neatly illustrates the extreme hubris inherent in this attitude. It's very convenient for a skeptic to contemplate the sort of world he would create, or the improvements he would make on this world, by simply considering the advantages of having the kind or degree of power that God has. But the question the skeptic should pose to himself is this: "What sort of world would I create if I had God's *knowledge*?" Who cannot see that that is a question the skeptic cannot possibly answer? He would have to have Godlike knowledge—would have to be omniscient—in order to know what kind of world God's knowledge would lead him to create. And when it comes to making improvements on this world, one has to wonder whether, if all any ordinary human person had, in addition to his own natural capacities, was God's power, he would have a convenient head start, as it were, just working on a ready-made world such as our own. There's plenty that's good and ingenious about our world that would already be intact and set for the omnipotent skeptic to go to work on. What if the skeptic, endowed with omnipotence, were to start from scratch? What are the odds that he would ever come close to creating a world as cleverly organized as ours?

This is at least an intriguing set of challenges. But it is, if theism is true, needlessly abstract and conceptual. Consider, again, Bruce Nolan. Bruce gets a chance at trying his own hand at the wheel. We do not. But Bruce also comes to know God in a personal way. And, consistent with ideas developed in connection with our meditation on *No Country for Old Men*, Bruce's fellowship with God correlates with a new attitude in Bruce himself: he is prepared to serve God on God's own terms, no matter what. This is the effect of Bruce's novel conviction that God is perfectly loving and all-wise, in addition to being all-powerful. This means that God knows what he's doing and the only thing that makes sense is for Bruce to submit his will to God's. And he does so quite happily. Very little about his life before his encounter with God has changed when he's back to exercising his ordinary, limited capacities. If anything, there are new challenges. His girlfriend has left him, and he's been demoted once again at his job. But Bruce is content. He embraces his life. And he does not just embrace his old life; he adopts a whole new form of life that is informed by what he now knows about God. This is the crucial point of growth for Bruce. Though at first he thought he knew better than God how to run the world, and he attempted to improve on the world using ample powers and no increase in wisdom, Bruce's knowledge did expand in an important way. He came to know God. And this knowledge of God was not merely propositional. It was personal knowledge that issued in trust and obedience.

In the end, Bruce freely wills to surrender himself to God. "I want you to decide what's right for me," he says. "I surrender to your will." Bruce is able to do this because he has an altogether different conception of God. He believes God to be perfectly loving and worthy of obedience. And though he has learned that his own life works better if he lives in concert with God's will, it's clear that he wills to obey God *come what may*. This denotes a radical transformation in Bruce. And this transformation serves to confirm the truth of God's reality. It also is noticed by others, suggesting that Bruce's personal moral transformation becomes evidence for others, as well.

Bruce Almighty is one of the few deeply affecting comedies to explore such a range of theological themes with real sophistication.

Post-apocalyptic Exploits

Post-apocalyptic film, a staple of the contemporary filmmaking diet, is natural fodder for the mastication of religious themes. The cataclysm that brings human history to its knees must be explained as a kind of judicial act or event, the starkness of left-over, ashen reality must be illuminated by an ember of hope, and the future, though not yet in foreclosure, must be threatened by the prospect of further human corruption. This is the formula for post-apocalyptic blockbusterdom. One recent film that effectively implements these structural ingredients also connects up in creative ways with explicitly theistic themes.

The Book of Eli (directed by Albert and Allen Hughes 2010) is an impressive entry in this genre of film. Elijah Stone (Denzel Washington) is an enigmatic figure on a suitably peculiar mission. Curiously adept in sundry arts of self-defense, he is the custodian of a coveted book—the only copy of the Bible to have survived “the flash” that nearly annihilated human civilization some thirty years earlier. Safe passage of the Book to a colony of survivors—hunkered down at Alcatraz—is threatened by a seedy character called Carnegie.

Carnegie craves possession of the Book. Believing it to be a terrific source of power over the general population, he is completely naive about the true nature of that power. He “shepherds” the people of his community using words saturated with biblical symbolism:

I want you all to remember how far we’ve come together. And how far we still can go, if only we believe. When I brought us here to this oasis—this promised land—we knew there would be hardships. Knew there would be sacrifices. But we also knew that we were creating for ourselves a world where we could be safe from the horrors of the forsaken lands beyond our borders.

(All quotes are from the screenplay by Gary Whitta; see Whitta 2007)

Carnegie is the latest iteration of that unmistakable personality type—the faux evangelist. He is the new Moses, organizing his people in the wilderness. He continues:

And I want you all to remember above all that it is not the water with which we have been blessed that is the true lifeblood of this town . . . but faith. It is our faith that sustains us, brothers and sisters. Hallelujah!

Carnegie forecasts further blessing.

And mark me, the ultimate validation of that faith is coming! The sacred Word of our Lord that formed the world and that will reform it once again is coming to this town to bring it succor, bring it nourishment, bring it new life! For the Almighty Himself has spoken unto me and promised it!

This bluster is followed by a private exchange between Carnegie and his woman, a thirty-something beauty named Claudia. Here he’s exposed as a smooth-talking narcissist. Though he talks of faith, he has no use for the real thing.

Soon there will be direct conflict between Carnegie and Eli, who has just arrived in town. Their conflict will be violent. Eli's resources will be severely tested. He will be gunned down and left for dead. But he will rise again, and with renewed vigor he will resume his journey. Eventually, twenty-five years after the start of his journey, he will make it to Alcatraz. And there he will hand over the Book. An avuncular professor named Lombardi will take it into custody. And then it will be revealed that Eli's Book, the vaunted King James Version of the Bible, was written in braille, that Eli himself is blind, and that, in fact, Carnegie has the Book—though it will be useless to him because it is untranslatable.

At Alcatraz, and suffering from his old wounds, Eli will pour every ounce of residual strength into dictating from memory a fresh manuscript of the Book. The Book will be preserved in a place of honor: on a protected shelf between copies of the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'an. With his mission accomplished, Eli will expire. And his friend Solara will leave Alcatraz, with a newly minted copy of the Bible under her arm and the resolve to share God's truth with others.

The Book of Eli is the story of a man who was provisioned by God to save God's revelation to humanity from extermination and abuse. This revelation purports to be God's own solution to the human predicament, which by Eli's time has deteriorated utterly. This solution promises to restore humanity to relationship with God through obedience to the will of God. So much is clearly expressed in the film. Eli is a model of a fallible human being who chooses complete submission to God's will, come what may. He suffers for it, to be sure, even to the point of death. But the resulting suffering only effects a deeper commitment to God and experience of God's sustaining grace.

One important message of the film is that religion—even true religion—can indeed be hijacked by self-serving narcissists for sinister purposes. Carnegie would exploit religion with a convincing public veneer of sincerity that is belied by attitudes and actions revealed behind closed doors. This effort is ultimately futile, however, because frustrated by God himself. If this seems unrealistic in relation to religious reality as experienced today, one should bear in mind that *The Book of Eli* portrays a post-apocalyptic scenario, where matters are coming to a head and God is in control. The film's depiction of God's reversal of evil's pretensions also shows God's call on the life of an individual, and God's use of one who accepts his vocation in the world under God and in complete submission to the outworking of God's will—again, come what may.

In Eli we see a man who, though his encounter with suffering and evil is real, knows God in fellowship. This bears comparison with *No Country for Old Men*. Both films are dark. One leaves us thinking, because evil is so palpable, that God is someplace else, disengaged from the mess of human life; the other reverberates with hope in the midst of palpable evil because there is evidence, accessed through personal relationship with God, not only of God's actual existence, but of God's concern for humanity.

Some have noted Eli's blindness and found in it a subtextual message about the relationship between faith and reason, suggesting that faith operates apart from reason. Such fideism has had a long and disturbing influence in treatments of religious epistemology, but I question the easy assumption that this is what Eli's blindness stands for in the film. I suggest that Eli's powers of perception are heightened through his intimate dependence on God, that the rationality of Eli's commitment to his strange vocation is reinforced by evidence of God's very real presence and action on Eli's behalf, and that Eli's persistent obedience to God's known will is rewarded with a blessed life that surpasses understanding among those who think they see better than he. Eli's bold actions

are rooted in confident belief, and his belief is anchored in the evidence of the rightness of his mission.

In terms of the theism described earlier, Eli is emboldened to enter into a form of life that makes sense if God exists, because God is a perfectly loving and eminently competent being who would be fully aware of humanity's predicament, would have the resources essential to healing what ails humanity, and would reveal to humanity what human persons each must do individually to enter into healing relationship with God.

In *The Book of Eli*, these themes are developed within a context of divine enablement, or direct divine intervention on Eli's behalf. When we finally learn that Eli has traveled alone for decades, fighting off murdering outlaws and thieves, in protection of a book that he knows intimately, *without physical sight*, we infer that his exploits are tokens of the miraculous.

Wundersucht

Jesus warned his contemporaries of an unhealthy dependence on miracles for support of their faith in God (see Matthew 12:39, 16:4; Mark 8:11–12; Luke 11:9). And he presciently announced that if a person was not prepared to believe God's word to Moses and the prophets, then neither would they believe if a man was raised from the dead (Luke 16:31). The Apostle Paul noted that, on the one hand, "the Jews require a sign," and on the other, "the Gentiles seek after wisdom" (1 Corinthians 1:22). It's as if one group would not believe without overwhelming supernatural evidence, and the other group wouldn't trust anything that could not be fully grounded in human reasoning in the absence of miraculous support. If miracles are not invincible evidence of divine reality, reported miracles are insuperable evidence of human credulity.

Things haven't changed much in two thousand years. Today there are people who will believe almost any rumor of a *bona fide* miracle, while others taunt believers with a pretended willingness to believe, if only God would do something miraculous to make it obvious that He exists. Some, desperate for healing, race to the scene of reported miracles, while a secular media reports with studied detachment alleged miracles of healing.

This *wundersucht*, or "passion for miracles," is no less evident in the world of film. In one way or another, miracles and alleged miracles, of one sort or another, figure in numerous films of the past few decades.

The movie *Henry Poole Is Here* (directed by Mark Pellington, released 2008) serves as an interesting study of cinematic treatment of the miraculous and of the credentials of belief in God. Reviews by recalcitrant and hyper-sensitive secularists followed predictable patterns. Obsessed with the law-like and the predictable, they disparaged the supernaturalism of the film. For example, Stephen Holden, reviewing for *The New York Times*, called it "insufferable hokum" that "traffics in the kind of inspirational kitsch that only a true believer could swallow" (Holden 2008).

But what are we meant to swallow? Is the movie a prompt to believe that miracles of physical healing actually happen? That's a superficial interpretation of the film's premise that only a hardened skeptic (and thoroughly cynical film critic) could swallow.

The film's director had something else in mind. In the winter of 2003, Pellington came across a spec script called *Stain*, by Albert Torres. It was "a funny, human, and heartfelt tale of a man facing death who ultimately received the gift of life." It struck a cord then, but the message returned to haunt Pellington some months later after his

wife passed away. Her death, he writes, “was unexpected and screwed up and wrong. And it turned my world upside down.” This connected with Pellington’s decision to make the film:

When faced with a life-changing trauma, you go to the core of survival. You eschew work, and life as you knew it changes. You basically learn how to live in a new way . . . You realize fundamental truths about yourself and inevitably reevaluate the world in new ways. You literally have to reexamine everything again, including spirituality, perspective and life choices.

(Pellington 2008)

For Pellington, making *Henry Poole Is Here* was an exercise in reevaluating the world.

As I began to reexamine and explore the films I had wanted to make or was attached to, I felt disconnected to many [that seemed one dimensionally darker] . . . I was less drawn to anything devoid of what I felt was a newly emerging sense of hope for something else—a more balanced worldview of humanity and some degree of positivism.

(Ibid.)

A “newly emerging sense of hope.” This was the engine that pushed Pellington to make the film.

Henry Poole, played by Luke Wilson, has a mysterious disease that will eventually kill him. Hoping to re-connect with his roots, he’s returned to the neighborhood of his youth. He buys an aging house just up the street from his boyhood home. He pays full price and declines the real estate agent’s offer to re-stucco the exterior—because, he says, he won’t be there for long and it would be a waste of time. Mrs Wyatt, the agent, ignores his protestations and has the work done anyway. Poole observes that, on one corner of the house, the new stucco has an ugly stain. That stain will soon become the bane of his existence: the object of unwelcome attention and a symbol of his own psychological scars.

The backstory is important for understanding Henry’s malaise. As a boy, when his parents were fighting, Henry would ride his bicycle to a secluded area where he felt safe. On one such occasion, he had scrawled these words on the harsh underbelly of a steel bridge: “Henry Poole was here.” This made his tenuous existence seem more substantial. Eventually, he moved away. We’re led to believe that his parents’ marriage had long since dissolved. Now, his own death immanent because of a mysterious disease, Henry has returned to his neighborhood, hoping to buy the house of his childhood memories.

Henry settles into his sparsely furnished quarters on a diet of booze, pizza, and doughnuts, and in a state of near catatonic despondency. Esperanza Martinez (Adriana Barraza), from next door, arrives with homemade tamales welcoming Poole to the neighborhood. She spies the stain on his wall and is instantly alert to its religious significance. “!Es un rostro de dios!” she exclaims, “The face of God, the face of Christ. It’s like a sign from God!”

Henry is not amused. And when the parish priest (George Lopez) arrives to investigate, Henry worries—correctly, as it happens—that things are about to get out of hand.

Meanwhile, a mute six-year-old girl (wonderfully portrayed by Morgan Lily) is recording all of his backyard conversations. Patience (Rachel Seiferth), the young and seriously near-sighted cashier at the local “Super Bueno Market,” is growing concerned about his penchant for vodka and other libations. And Dawn Stupek (Radha Mitchell), the mute girl’s beautiful mother, is soon bringing him cookies and inviting him over to “play with her daughter.”

Thus we are introduced to an unlikely cast of characters, all misfits in their own way, and the circumstances that will test Henry’s mettle as a sane and not-always-sober religious skeptic.

There actually are three sources for Henry’s melancholy take on life. There is the matter of his terminal illness, of course. Then there’s his self-induced isolation from human community. And, finally, there’s his exasperation with all things spiritual and with the religious zeal that afflicts his neighbors. For all this, Henry is a sympathetic character. We feel his pain and we understand his religious skepticism. This is all by directorial design. At no point during the film does it seem that Henry is excessive in his reluctance to admit a religious interpretation of the stain on his stucco wall. In contrast, Esperanza (whose name means “hope”) is notably credulous, and less sympathetic for being so.

On the other hand, there are anomalies and dramatic events to account for. A red substance is seen occasionally seeping from the stain on the wall. And six-year-old Milie recovers her voice while standing before the wall. Her mother doesn’t know what to make of it, but she’s “just praying that it stays that way.” And Patience has her eyesight restored when standing, expectantly, facing the wall.

Esperanza believes that Henry’s wall bears the face of Jesus. She’s convinced that Milie was healed by touching the wall. What she can’t believe is why Henry can’t believe. At a crucial moment in the film, piqued with resentment, Henry lectures Esperanza.

Why is it so important to you that I believe that something like that could happen? . . . Because I’ll tell you. Because if you can convince me, then suddenly your beliefs become more real. Right? The more people you can get to jump on your “God’s-on-the-wall” train, the more your mission’s made. So until you get me to swallow your world and believe what you believe, you’ll never have the kind of faith you want to have. You’ll always have a little bit of doubt. You’ll never know if you’re quite right. You’ll always kind of be wondering if it’s real.

Esperanza’s belief in the supernatural significance of Henry’s wall is puzzling in its own right. More puzzling still is her evident determination to convince Henry to believe. But here we see, and can make sense of, Henry’s explanation for both. Esperanza believes. But her belief needs reinforcement. If she can get a skeptic to believe, it will bolster her own confidence.

Henry may or may not be right about Esperanza, but his theory is plausible. So, we might think, is an inversion of Henry’s explanation. He refuses to believe. And he seems desperate to disabuse others of their credulity. Could it be that he is uncomfortable in his solitary refusal to allow that miracles happen?

Clearly, living together, as believers and nonbelievers, we influence each other in our evaluation of evidence, in what we take to be reasonable, in what we are prepared to believe, and in how we are prepared to act in light of what we believe.

This movie is not about getting people to swallow without evidence the idea that miracles happen all around us. It is a study of the resolve of a religious skeptic who is

faced with evidence that his skepticism is irrational. Viewers are asked, in effect, to consider what it would take for them to move from skepticism to belief.

The film might also encourage viewers to reflect on the nature and purpose of miracles. From a religious point of view, a stain on the stucco wall of someone's house, a house that belongs to a skeptic no less, seems like an especially improbable miracle, even if miracles do happen.

On theism, miracles are linked to divine purposes that connect with human needs. Patience is horribly and embarrassingly near-sighted. Esperanza is lonely. Dawn is beside herself with concern for her daughter. And the little girl is psychically locked up with her painful thoughts, unable to communicate. One by one, each experiences healing. And belief in the *possibility* of miracles appears to be a pre-condition. As the story goes, Henry has needs, too. He is lonely. He is about to die from a mysterious disease. He, too, is locked up psychologically. But he has a problem the others do not have. He is unable to believe that miracles happen. And so his problem is more serious. He requires evidence. And in the make-believe story *Henry Poole Is Here*, evidence is provided. A test has been conducted and it confirms that the stain is blood.

Henry, though, is relentlessly skeptical. He goes into a rage and chops away at the wall of his house. He is surrounded by a host of witnesses, all of whom believe in the miraculous character of the stain, and all of whom care for Henry. Henry's violent action literally brings the house down on his head, so that he is hospitalized. And during the course of his hospitalization, it is discovered that Henry is not ill after all. He had been given a specious diagnosis by a quack doctor.

The upshot is predictable. Henry is relieved. The potential for lasting relationship with Dawn and her daughter is secured. Pesky acquaintances become true friends. But what might be missed is the role that God plays in the finale. There is reason to believe that Henry eventually softened in his anti-miraculous outlook. But it isn't because he is finally persuaded of the supernatural character of the stain on his house. Rather, Henry has had a transformational experience that might be credited to divine providence. If it hadn't been for his hospitalization, Henry would not have learned that he was in good health. And if he had not razed his house, he would not have been hospitalized. And if it had not been for the stain, Henry would not have destroyed his house. But what accounts for the stain? Perhaps a loving God's intention to woo Henry to Himself, without offending Henry's intellect.

The film's title speaks of renewal in Henry's life. Returning home, Henry writes a new phrase on a wall in one of the rooms: "Henry Poole Is Here." The inversion—from "was here" to "is here"—symbolizes the reversal of Henry Poole's prognosis—the probable course and outcome of his mysterious disease. His improvement is spiritual. That is, he is psychically restored. Henry Poole is here. He is very much alive. And it's all because of the stain.

Perhaps the film is as much about cynical film critics as it is about "blind faith." Perhaps the film's critics are altogether blind to the real values of the film. Hung up on the a priori "impossibility" of miracles, they cannot view the film in the spirit of make believe. Of course, nothing, including a "kitschy" film could make them believe. Religious belief isn't like that.

This film illustrates a strange, and strangely overlooked, irony about much religious skepticism. The most common weapon of choice in the skeptics' battle against theism is an argument from evil to the non-existence of God. Skeptics complain that the worst evils reveal that God is absent when God would, if he existed, be present. On the other

hand, the skeptics' unwillingness to accept miraculous attestation of theism imposes on God the burden of eliminating evil without making his own existence obvious by virtue of the miraculous. In effect, God should deal with evil on our terms without expecting us to believe in him. But if the theism outlined at the beginning of this chapter is true, then this skeptical posture is not merely ironic. It is tragic. Of course, this chapter does not attempt to prove that God exists. And it's safe to say that no narrative film could.

Conclusion: Director's Choice

Movie directors are the acknowledged creators of the films they direct. They exercise more creative autonomy than any other party to the filmmaking enterprise. If we think strictly in terms of the director's chair, we might think only of their directing actors. But film directors also direct *viewers*. Using the implements of film, they direct the attention of viewers to themes and ideas. They manipulate the tools of their trade in order to touch the hearts and minds of the people who watch. Those people are *their* audience. We marvel at the special effects of some films. But the really impressive effect of film is the effect it has on those who watch, and see played out, for better or worse, the lineaments of one worldview or another.

The interpretation of any film is a risky business. This is especially true when picking through the subtextual clues of a film in search of its worldview orientation. This is one severe limitation of so-called "narrative rationality." Narratives do not make straightforward arguments. This is sometimes considered an advantage. It certainly is an advantage for anyone whose worldview falters with respect to reasons and evidence. As a tool of persuasion, a great film will thrum the heart strings and sometimes garner buy-in from viewers. And many viewers are vulnerable to the blandishments of great films and their gifted directors. Viewers should be aware of the potential that films have to effect shifts, however slight, in their own worldview commitments. In a way, the effort required is greater than when given a direct argument for something they do not yet believe, for the tools of persuasion operate with greater subtlety in film.

On the other hand, good films play a valuable role in placing before their audiences worldview elements worthy of consideration. Theism is one such worldview. And as we've seen, theism enjoys a fair share of attention in contemporary film.

Related Topics

Chapter 4: Christianity; Chapter 43: Aesthetics; Chapter 44: Literature; Chapter 47: Narrative; Chapter 54: The Meaning of Life

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Recommended Reading

- Geivett, R. D. and J. S. Spiegel (eds), (2007) *Faith, Film, and Philosophy: Big Ideas on the Big Screen*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. A dozen essays with investigations of philosophical themes in significant films from a theistic point of view.
- Moser, P. K. (2009) *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. A creative treatment of the conditions for human flourishing, according to theism.
- Seger, L. (1992) *Writing Subtext: What Lies Beneath*, Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions. Advice to screenwriters about the techniques and rewards of writing subtext into their films; an aid to viewers, as well.
- Simmons, A. (2006) *The Story Factor: Inspiration, Influence, and Persuasion Through the Art of Storytelling*, revised edition, New York: Basic Books. An accessible discussion of ways in which narratives influence emotion, belief, and action.
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47

NARRATIVE

Anthony Rudd

The telling of stories seems to play an important role in (almost?) all religions. One learns about the gods primarily by hearing their stories told. Even in religions with explicitly articulated systems of doctrine, narrative remains of central importance. In Judaism, to learn about God is not, in the first place, to learn that God is omnipotent, omniscient, etc., but to learn that He established a covenant with Abraham, led His people from slavery in Egypt, gave them the Law on Mt Sinai and so forth. In Christianity the story is continued; we learn more about God by learning that He became incarnate in Jesus Christ, suffered for our sins and rose from the dead. In Judaism and Christianity, then, narrative isn't just a convenient form for presenting doctrines that could, in principle, be grasped abstractly; rather, the narrative of God's actions makes up a crucial part of the content of those doctrines. In other religions, narrative might not be quite as central. The story of the historical Buddha, his quest for and attainment of Enlightenment, isn't exactly a part of the content of Buddhist doctrine (it isn't itself one of the Four Noble Truths) in the same way that the Passion narrative is a part of Christian doctrine; but, nevertheless, the story of the Buddha has been, and remains, of great value for Buddhists.

Narrative is clearly important, then, for understanding particular religions; but what is its relation to theism? Theism describes God at a level of generality and abstraction, so that a theist as such could be an adherent of a variety of different religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, theistic forms of Hinduism) or of none. One might think, then, that different theistic religions differ in the particular narratives they tell about God, while agreeing on abstract, non-narrative specifications (God is omnipotent, omniscient, *causa sui*, etc.). On this view, theism as such would have little to do with narrative. Furthermore, though "narrative theology" may claim only that narrative understanding of God in a particular tradition can take us beyond the understanding of God offered by philosophical theism, more radical versions of narrative theology might adopt a stance of positive hostility to such non-narratively embellished theism. The long-standing tradition which sets up an antithesis between the God of the philosophers and the God of Abraham, or between Athens and Jerusalem, can be articulated as a contrast between abstract metaphysical, and concrete narrative, ways of understanding God—ways between which we are supposed to have to choose.

Despite these reasons for doubt I will, in what follows, suggest that there are important connections to be made between theism and narrative. Narratives that purport to tell us about God do seem to involve some specific religious tradition, and cannot therefore be taken as part of theism as such. But whether or not we need narrative to understand God, it might be that we need it to understand ourselves. So it has been

claimed by a number of influential philosophers who have in recent decades elaborated narrative theories of both personal identity and ethics (see Carr 1986; MacIntyre 2007; Taylor 1989; Ricœur 1991a and b, 1992; Schechtman 1996; and Atkins 2008). It is arguable that these theories ultimately need some kind of theistic basis, or, at least, fit most naturally and plausibly into a theistic framework. If this is correct, and if these theories are otherwise plausible, then this would constitute a significant argument in favor of theism. But even if narrative self-understanding does not necessarily point to theism, someone who does accept both theism and the claim that our self-understanding takes a narrative form will have to accept that our self-understanding in relation to God needs to be understood in narrative terms—a point that is not in itself insignificant. But before looking at these issues, it will be necessary to give a brief survey of the narrative approach to thinking about personal identity and ethics.

Narrative Theories of Self-Understanding

Galen Strawson, the most forceful recent critic of narrative theory, distinguishes between a “psychological Narrativity thesis,” according to which “human beings typically see or live or experience their lives as a narrative or story of some sort” and an “ethical Narrativity thesis,” which claims that “experiencing or conceiving one’s life as a narrative is a good thing; a richly Narrative outlook is essential to a well-lived life” (Strawson 2004: 428). It might seem that if the psychological thesis is true, then the ethical one is redundant; why commend ethically something that we can’t avoid doing in any case? However, as Strawson notes, the combination of the two theses leaves “plenty of room for the idea that many of us would profit from being more Narrative than we are” (Strawson 2004: 429). I will focus mainly, though not exclusively, on those theorists—most notably Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor—who fully accept both theses. In the rest of this section I will briefly describe the main features of the narrative view of personal identity and ethics, initially abstracting as much as possible from the differences between the various narrative theorists referred to above.

It will be important to start by explaining exactly what is meant by a “narrative” in this context. (I’m not, incidentally, claiming that the word “narrative” is always used in just these ways. The characterizations of narrative in this section should be regarded as stipulative, as ways of explaining a semi-technical term.) First, a narrative is more than just a chronicle (that is, simply a list of events in chronological order). What a narrative adds to that is that it is so structured as to make sense of those events, to show how one event follows intelligibly from what has gone before, and in turn makes intelligible what follows. Second, the intelligibility in question is primarily psychological (which means that a narrative, in the relevant sense, is basically a story about human actions, or at any rate, about the actions of conscious rational beings). Suppose I ask why Axel spoke harshly to Beth, and I am told that Axel was angry with her because he had heard that she had swindled his mother. I have then been given, not just a cause, but a *reason* for his action, or have had the *meaning* of his action explained to me. That people in a situation like A’s tend to act in a certain way to people who they believed to have acted as B did, is not just a brute fact that we learn by induction (as we learn that billiard balls move in certain ways when struck by other billiard balls); rather, it makes sense to us, the response is one that intrinsically fits the situation (which is not to say that it is the only response that would fit the situation, nor are we necessarily committed to endors-

ing A's action as morally right). Bringing these themes together, MacIntyre argues that narrative is the basic form of action explanation; to understand why someone acted as s/he did is to situate that action in a temporal context within which it makes sense, in the kinds of ways described above (see MacIntyre 2007: 205–11). This contrasts sharply with the ways in which natural science explains events, in terms of efficient (mechanical) causality and general covering laws. In contrast, narrative explanation is irreducibly intentional, teleological and particular.

A third important point is that a narrative in the relevant sense is not just a literary artifact, something written down or told after the event. Rather, we live our narratives before we tell them. I understand what I am doing, or what is happening to me, in narrative terms without having to stop and think about it. I see this café as the place I need to get to because I agreed to meet you there, because we had decided that we wanted to see the play together, because . . . My surroundings, in ordinary social life, make sense to me as the settings in which my story plays out. As Marya Schechtman puts it,

[T]he sense of one's life as unfolding according to the logic of a narrative is not just an *idea* we have, it is an organizing principle of our lives. It is the lens through which we filter our experiences and plan for actions.

(Schechtman 1996: 113)

And it is that whether or not we are consciously articulating to ourselves (or others) the narrative that we are living out. A fourth point to add is that, as an agent, I am able not only to tell my story but to actively shape it. As MacIntyre says, each agent is “not only an actor but an author” (MacIntyre 2007: 213). However, he also goes on to stress the social, rather than merely individual construction of narratives. “We are never more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our own narratives. Only in fantasy do we live what story we please” (MacIntyre 2007: 213).

If MacIntyre's anti-scientistic argument is right, even a simple action, like someone's digging the garden or making coffee, has to be understood in narrative terms. As we build in more narrative context, we might get a deeper understanding of a broader swathe of the person's life—for example, the story of their career, or marriage. Finally, we might hope to get an understanding of the person's life as a whole—whether the person in question is me or someone else. (Of course, if the person is still living, this sense will always be provisional.) Hence the claim that my identity as a person—my sense of who I am—is something that must be understood in narrative terms. Who I am is the protagonist of my life story. This is how the narrative theorists take up, but radically alter, the traditional Lockean account of personal identity across time as constituted by psychological continuities (see Locke 1979 [1690]: Book II, ch. XXVII). (For a radical modern development of this line of thought see Parfit (1984: Part Three). Parfit is criticized for failing to see narrative intelligibility as the condition for understanding psychological continuity in MacIntyre (2007: 216–17); Taylor (1989: 49–50); and in Ricœur (1991b: 192–9 and 1992: 129–39).)

If we add the stress on agency, with respect to our partial self-authoring, to this idea of grasping a life as a whole, we reach the idea that a person's life is ideally something that s/he grasps as a whole and consciously directs towards an end. This would be what Schechtman calls “the strong narrative view” according to which “a person must actively and consciously undertake to understand her life as a story . . . if that life is to be meaningful” (Schechtman 2007: 160–1). (It should be noted that Schechtman herself

is skeptical of this strong view.) Here we can start to see the connection between narrative accounts of personal identity, and of ethics. MacIntyre especially, but other narrative theorists also, have been concerned to revive a broadly Aristotelian understanding of ethics as the pursuit of the good life (*eudaimonia*—fulfillment, self-realization). This requires both a sense of agency, of my being in charge of my life rather than a victim of fate (at least insofar as I can be; Aristotle and the Stoics disagreed about this) and a sense of my life as an intelligible whole, which can be assessed in terms of its progress (or lack of progress) towards the good. And to have such a sense of my life, according to the view outlined above, is to think of it as a continuing narrative. As Paul Ricœur asks:

How indeed, could a subject of action give an ethical character to his or her life taken as a whole if this life were not gathered together in some way, and how could this occur if not, precisely, in the form of a narrative?

(Ricœur 1992: 158)

A broadly construed Aristotelian ethics—that is, one that doesn’t simply lay down rules to govern social interactions, but which is concerned with the “character of one’s life as a whole”—seems to require narrative self-understanding.

Charles Taylor has argued for the connection between narrative and ethics in a somewhat different way. He claims that it is distinctive of us as persons that we have the capacity to step back from our immediate desires or inclinations and to assess them, to consider whether they are really worthwhile (Taylor 1976: 1985). But this requires that we have a sense, however vague or inarticulate—or, indeed, however mistaken—of what really is of value and what isn’t. Our sense of who we are is, on his view, inseparable from our sense of what is worth doing; so my sense of my own identity is necessarily one that locates me in “moral space.” But such location is not something static; to understand how my relation to the good is developing is only possible in narrative terms:

Since we cannot do without an orientation to the good, and since we cannot be indifferent to our place relative to this good, and since this place is something that must always change and become, the issue of the direction of our lives must arise for us. . . . [I]n order to have an identity, we need an orientation to the good . . . this sense of the good has to be woven into my understanding of my life as an unfolding story . . . in order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become and of where we are going.

(Taylor 1989: 47)

Narrative and Theism

Having briefly set out some of the main aspects of the narrative account of personal identity and ethics, I now want to consider whether there is any particular relationship between that account and theism. Certainly, not all narrative theorists are theists (and nor are all theists narrativists), but some of the most prominent advocates of narrative theory are theists—most notably, MacIntyre, Taylor and Ricœur. That this could be more than just a coincidence is suggested—albeit in a distinctly hostile way—by Strawson, who, as noted above, is perhaps the most aggressive recent critic of the narrative approach. Having cited the passage from Ricœur that I quoted above, about

how one needs narrative in order to “give an ethical character to [one’s] life as a whole,” Strawson then wonders, “why on earth, in the midst of the beauty of being, it should be thought important to do this.” He continues:

I think that those who think in this way are motivated by a sense of their own importance or significance that is absent in other human beings. Many of them, connectedly, have religious commitments. They are wrapped up in forms of religious belief that are—like almost all religious belief—really all about self.

(Strawson 2004: 436–7)

Sneering and tendentious as this remark is, it raises important issues, to some of which I shall return in the next section. For now I want to focus on the connection that Strawson suggests between a sense of the importance of one’s own self, a broadly Aristotelian kind of ethics, and a religious outlook. One does not have to accept Strawson’s claim that a sense of one’s own significance is necessarily narcissistic or involves selfishness in an ethically objectionable sense. Setting that evaluative judgment to the side for now, it is fair to say that any ethical or spiritual outlook that emphasizes the importance of giving the right shape to one’s life as a whole is one that can be said to see the self as having a great significance. (That many of these traditions can also be said to aim at selflessness, or a transcending of the ego might be a paradox, but it is not a contradiction.) This emphasis on self-cultivation is central to many different traditions. Although it is not specific to theism, it certainly is crucial to the main theistic religions. So Strawson is right that someone who has traditional theistic commitments will also be committed to thinking of his or her life as a whole; to thinking that it matters greatly to give that life a certain shape or character; and to thinking that this involves directing the trajectory of that life towards the good (that is, God). And so theists who are convinced that all of this requires them to have a sense of their lives as narratives will be committed to narrative self-understanding, in the “strong” sense identified by Schechtman above.

It is also the case that most theists are members of specific religious traditions, and their understandings of their relations to God are mediated by those traditions. As MacIntyre in particular has argued, we build our narratives out of materials provided by our cultures, especially the stories they tell, which give us our initial understanding of what it is to be a good warrior, mother or whatever. And this is true of religious communities. Their members’ personal narratives will be shaped by, modeled on, the paradigmatic narratives of saints and prophets handed down by their traditions. Ricœur has written a good deal about the importance of myth, symbolism and narrative in particular religious traditions (see, for example, Ricœur 1995). But he has very deliberately separated this work from his main philosophical inquiry into narrative selfhood and ethics. His major work on this subject, *Oneself as Another*, was based on his 1986 Gifford lectures, which concluded with two lectures exploring themes in biblical hermeneutics. But these were excluded from the published text, in order, as Ricœur says, to ensure “the bracketing, conscious and resolute, of the convictions that bind me to biblical faith” (Ricœur 1992: 24). But nor is Ricœur willing to speak philosophically even at the more abstract level of theism: he goes on to note his commitment to “a type of philosophy from which the actual mention of God is absent and in which the question of God, as a philosophical question, remains in a suspension that could be called agnostic” (Ricœur 1992: 24).

MacIntyre and Taylor have been willing to make closer connections between theism and their philosophies of narrative. They have explored the issue of whether there might

be reason to think that a narrative sense of one's life as a whole requires theism—or at least, that such an understanding fits best within a generally theistic outlook. MacIntyre came to think that the latter was true. His main contribution to narrative theory is in his *After Virtue* and, at the time that book was first published (1981) he was agnostic on religious matters. He was concerned there mainly to argue for the revival of a basically Aristotelian kind of ethics and he notes that, for Aristotle himself, the teleological understanding of human life as directed towards an end (the good life) was underpinned by a “metaphysical biology.” And, in MacIntyre's analysis, it was the abandonment of the Aristotelian belief that reality as a whole has a teleological character that, in early modernity, led to the collapse of Aristotelian ethics. This set the stage for the “Enlightenment Project” of finding some alternative, non-teleological basis for morality; a project that, according to MacIntyre, failed utterly. Seeking to revive Aristotle's teleological ethics apart from his broader teleological world-view, MacIntyre argued in *After Virtue* that metaphysics and biology could be replaced by culture in explaining human life as teleological in character; the good that is our *telos* could be explicated in terms of cooperative social practices without the need for further, and more contentious, metaphysical explanations.

MacIntyre fairly soon abandoned this belief. Not long after *After Virtue* appeared, he moved to a theistic (more specifically, a Catholic) position, and from a secular neo-Aristotelianism to Thomism. As he put it in the prologue to the third edition of *After Virtue*:

[M]y attempt to provide an account of the human good purely in social terms, in terms of practices, traditions and the narrative unity of human lives, was bound to be inadequate until I had provided it with a metaphysical grounding. It is only because human beings have an end to which they are directed by reason of their specific nature that practices, traditions, and the like are able to function as they do.

(MacIntyre 2007: xi)

Elsewhere he writes:

Explanations of what it is for someone to succeed in progressing toward or to fail in progressing towards their ultimate end . . . are of interest only if and insofar as we have good reason to believe that they are *true*. But such explanations will be true if and only if the universe itself is teleologically ordered, and the only type of teleologically ordered universe in which we have good reason to believe is a theistic universe.

(MacIntyre 1998: 152)

One could resist this argument for theism in one of three ways. First, by rejecting the whole project of reviving an Aristotelian approach to ethics, as, of course, many contemporary ethicists do. Second, by arguing that human life can be explained teleologically even if the universe as a whole has no teleological ordering. This could be done either by trying to make MacIntyre's own original socio-cultural account, or a related one (such as Marxism) work, or by looking in addition to (non-metaphysical) biology, as is attempted by some contemporary secular neo-Aristotelians (see, for example, Hursthouse 1999; Foot 2001). Third, one could look to some teleological but non-theistic

account of reality. So there is no knockdown argument for theism here (and MacIntyre is under no illusion about this). But there are serious problems with the second option, and, at least in Western philosophical culture, theism is the most developed teleological world-view available. So MacIntyre has, I think, shown that there is good reason for anyone who finds a teleological, Aristotelian approach to ethics attractive to take seriously the idea that it might be impossible to maintain without adopting theism.

Taylor's argument takes a rather different direction. As well as giving a far more favorable (though still critical) assessment of modernity than MacIntyre's, Taylor does not have MacIntyre's clear commitment to a specifically Aristotelian or Thomistic ethics. His argument for the centrality of narrative is based on his claim that we cannot avoid orienting our lives by reference to some evaluative principles or standards. But these might be very various, and not necessarily "moral" in any usual sense. People might give their allegiance to science and the pursuit of knowledge as an ultimate value; to a warrior ethic of strength and courage; or even to some post-modern ideal of "transgression" as an end in itself. Taylor's tentatively advanced claim is that purely immanent notions of the good leave too much in us unsatisfied and unaddressed; by refusing to acknowledge anything beyond this world they repress and mutilate a hunger for transcendence that, so Taylor suggests, is an ineradicable part of what it is to be human. While acknowledging the dangers posed by transcendent ideals, and eschewing any claims to "demonstrate" their validity, he does speak of "a hope I see implicit in Judaeo-Christian theism . . . in its central promise of a divine affirmation of the human, more total than humans can ever attain unaided" (Taylor 1989: 521). (See also Taylor 2007, where he tells the story of the secularization of the modern West with an eye to showing that the rejection of transcendence is not an inevitable effect of intellectual or moral progress, and itself rests on some highly questionable assumptions.)

Underlying both MacIntyre's and Taylor's arguments is a concern for meaning. Human beings look for meaning in their lives. On the most basic level, we simply want people's actions to be intelligible. And, according to MacIntyre's argument noted above, for an action to be intelligible is for it to fit into some narrative context. In normal cases, insofar as I am *acting* at all, my deeds will make at least some sense to me, though maybe not enough. But others' actions towards me, and the whole situation I find myself in, might make little sense—and if that is so, how can I know how to respond? But there is another sort of meaning that we look for; we want our actions, and the wider projects in which they are situated, to have *value*. I might complain that some tedious and repetitive work is "meaningless," while still being aware of why I am doing it and what it achieves. I just don't find it worth my while. It doesn't contribute to my feeling that my life is meaningful in a richer sense—that I am doing something that is worth my effort. The former sense of meaning (as mere intelligibility) seems necessary, though not sufficient for the latter, and it might help to produce it—when I come to understand the wider context of my actions, I might see the value in them. (I could, for example, come to see how the tedious job I do is contributing to building the revolution, winning the war, relieving famine.) By expanding the narrative we can come to find intelligibility and, if we are fortunate, value in what we are doing.

Generally speaking, then, if I find meaning in my life, it is because my actions contribute intelligibly to projects that have value for me—such as my work, study, developing athletic skills, raising children, political activity. There are two (closely related) problems here, though. First, these various projects might be all very well in themselves, but I could still find myself wondering who I am, as the person who engages in all of

them. Are they just distinct narratives, or do they contribute to a (richly) meaningful narrative that is of my life as a whole? This worry might stand out most clearly when the demands of particular aspects of my life (such as work and family life) conflict. When I have to choose between such demands, I am having to decide what matters more to me; which means deciding how I define myself. But how am I to do that (non-arbitrarily) unless I have a sense of myself that transcends these particular partial sources of identity, one that can give me a criterion for their ordering? But this cannot derive just from one more partial narrative, but, it seems, must come from something that stands over and above my life as a whole. There must be a good, a *telos* for me to aim at, that is not just the *telos* of some particular project; but (as MacIntyre noted) it seems hard to see how this could make sense on a purely naturalistic view.

The second problem is that, as Thomas Nagel points out, the very fact that humans, unlike other animals, can stand back from their activities and ask what meaning they have, can threaten our ability to hold onto such meaning (see Nagel 1979). Stepping back from all of the particular narratives I tell about my life, I can ask myself, why? My particular actions are rendered meaningful (when they are) by being placed in the context of a wider narrative, and that in turn in a still wider one; but as we continue to step back, we get to a point where the ultimate pointlessness of the whole story becomes apparent. We can't live our lives as detached spectators of them, so we will go on taking our lives seriously—but we also cannot simply shut off our “capacity to transcend ourselves in thought” (Nagel 1979: 23). So we “have always available a point of view outside the particular form of our lives, from which the seriousness appears gratuitous” (Nagel 1979: 14). Nagel thinks we try to escape the resulting sense of absurdity by “seeking broader ultimate concerns, from which it is impossible to step back” (Nagel 1979: 16). He suggests as candidates, “service to society, the state, the revolution, the progress of history, the advance of science, or religion and the glory of God” (Nagel 1979: 16). But, he continues, if we can step back from our individual lives and doubt their point, so too can we step back from these wider contexts and doubt their point. What is dubious about Nagel's argument here is his lumping God in with all the other possible objects of ultimate concern. For one plausible definition of God would be, precisely, “that from which we cannot step back.” Our capacity for transcendence, for stepping back, can call anything finite into question; but not what is infinite. However, if there is nothing infinite, then there is nothing that can give my life a meaning that is more than partial and provisional; always open to being undermined by stepping back.

I think people differ greatly in the extent to which they are troubled by this. Many do seem to find sufficient meaning in particular projects—such as work or family life. They might recognize that there is no deeper meaning underlying them, but could feel that there doesn't need to be. We are finite creatures, and finitely meaningful activities are meaningful enough for us. Or we might simply suppress the feeling that something is missing, or neutralize it with the “irony” that Nagel recommends as an alternative to defiance or despair. But many others feel deeply the need for an overall narrative to which their partial narratives contribute; one that defines us in ways we cannot step back from, and which ultimately underwrites the meaning that the particular narratives have by endowing them with a deeper meaning. This line of thought does suggest that, if Nagelian absurdism is to be avoided, we need to appeal to something absolute. Perhaps Nirvana or Tao, perhaps the Form of the Good, perhaps Hegel's or Bradley's Absolute—but the God of theism seems at least an obvious candidate here.

Narrative and the “Beauty of Being”

Critics of the narrative view have denied that we all necessarily understand our lives in narrative terms. According to Strawson, people just differ in the extent to which they do so, and there is no ethical reason why we *should* all do so if we are not naturally inclined to. But he quickly slides from this tolerant stance to a valorization of an anti-narrative approach to life as morally superior, and a condemnation of the attempt to give a strong narrative structure to one's life as generally a bad thing: “My guess is that it almost always does more harm than good—that the Narrative tendency to look for story or narrative coherence in one's life is, in general, a gross hindrance to self-understanding: to a just, general, practically real sense, implicit or explicit, of one's nature” (Strawson 2004: 447). The thought here is that trying too hard to take control of one's life, to give it a particular narrative shape, is something that kills spontaneity, openness to others and to the unexpected, and is liable to lead to self-deception. It is worth noting that similar—though less virulently expressed—worries have been voiced by philosophers who don't share Strawson's hostility to religion (see, for example, Quinn 2001; Lippitt 2007). Indeed, it might even be thought that theists have particular reason to share some of Strawson's suspicion of narrative theory. Shouldn't theism encourage us to surrender our lives to God's direction, rather than strive for autonomy as the authors of our own life stories? Shouldn't we try to be alert to what God might be saying to us, rather than trying to plot the shape of our lives as we think fit?

I have argued elsewhere that these worries are largely based on misunderstandings. In particular, striving to give narrative unity to one's life need not make one a self-absorbed control freak (see Rudd 2007, 2008, 2009). I noted above MacIntyre's insistence that we can never be more than the part-authors of our lives; I would add that, much of the time, we might better think of ourselves as editors, putting the raw material that life throws at us into some coherent order. It is a mistake, though a common one, to think that narrative theories require us to map out a detailed plot for our lives in advance and then grimly stick to that, forcing whatever events happen to occur into that pre-conceived framework. On the contrary, in narrating our own lives, we are making up our stories as we go along, weaving the contingencies of life into a design that keeps changing in previously unpredictable ways as we do so. A good image for the narrative life might be the improvisational comedian, working ideas thrown out by the audience into a routine that nonetheless manages to maintain its coherence. A good practitioner of “improv” does not force suggestions into a predetermined structure, but nor does s/he allow the routine to collapse into incoherent fragments. The skill of the comedian lies precisely in his or her ability to make ingenious and unexpected connections, to relate the new to the old.

Strawson's argument against narrative tends to caricature its target. But, as a contrast to that caricature, he does hint at an anti-narrativist ideal. I quoted above his rejection of Ricoeur's idea of giving ethical character to one's life as a whole. “Why on earth, in the midst of the beauty of being” he asks, should we think it “important to do this?” Strawson contrasts a narrativist ideal “of control and self-awareness in human life that is mistaken and potentially pernicious” with “truly happy-go-lucky, see-what-comes-along lives” which, he claims, “are among the best there are, vivid, blessed, profound” (Strawson 2004: 447, 449). A few lines earlier he mentions the idea of “living in the moment” and illustrates it with an (apparently favorable) reference to Matthew 6:34: “Take therefore no thought for the morrow, for the morrow will take thought for the

things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.” Instead of a narrow, self-mortifying struggle to impose narrative form on one’s life, he appears to recommend simply relaxing, letting-be, opening oneself to the blessing of whatever beauty comes one’s way from the “being” we dwell in the midst of. It is striking how late-Heideggerian this all sounds, although Strawson dismisses the early Heidegger’s notion of authenticity, which he sees as a call for grimly willed self-control (see Strawson 2004: 449).

What is particularly interesting about these remarks is what I can’t help hearing as their religious flavor. It’s not just that there are beautiful things that we may enjoy looking at, but that we are in the “midst of the beauty of being.” The happy-go-lucky life is not just happy, but “blessed.” And then there is that quote from the Sermon on the Mount. I am not suggesting that Strawson wants to endorse any sort of “religious” view, I merely note how natural he finds it to turn to language with inescapably religious overtones when he tries to articulate his ideal. My point is not really Strawson-exegesis, though. What I do want to suggest is that, although there seems to be at least a natural affinity between theism and the narrative outlook, the more radical anti-narrativist view is itself one which it seems natural to formulate in religious terms. (I am taking “religious” in a broad sense here—one could use something vaguer, like “spiritual,” but it makes no substantive difference.) So we have a clash, not between religious and anti-religious views, but between two views both of which can be expressed in religious terms, and both of which are, perhaps, most naturally and convincingly expressed in those terms.

It might be tempting to think that the distinction is really between a theistic and a non-theistic religiosity; that Strawson’s ideal has something Taoist, or perhaps Buddhist about it. But this depends on a simplistic understanding of both theistic and non-theistic religion. Most schools of Buddhism at least are very much focused on self-control and self-discipline; as the *Dhammapada*, one of the most revered of early Buddhist texts puts it: “Arrowsmiths fashion arrows; carpenters shape wood; the virtuous mold themselves” (*Dhammapada* 10, 17). (The whole *Dhammapada*, is centrally concerned with commending self-control, mindfulness, self-shaping.) There might be more similarity with Taoism, but perhaps more with popularized Western versions of Taoism than the actual Chinese traditions. On the other hand, the main theistic traditions all stress the importance of surrendering one’s own will to God’s, of allowing God to be the primary author of one’s story. (That Strawson’s ideal can be illustrated from such a central Christian text as the Sermon on the Mount is itself obviously important.) So a theist will have reason to prize receptivity and to reject an ideal of obsessive self-control.

I think all religious traditions, theistic or otherwise, have attempted to find some way of balancing the ideal of actively striving for God/Nirvana/harmony with the Tao, and so on, with that of passive receptivity. An extreme form of the latter ideal—an opting out of any attempt to direct one’s life or make decisions—seems as unattractive as the opposite extreme of trying to plan and control all aspects of one’s life. However, not only is it a complete misunderstanding of the narrative view to assume that it requires such obsessive planning, I would also suggest that the project of trying to find the right balance is itself something that we can only understand in narrative terms. One way to see this is to ask ourselves what dwelling in the midst of the beauty of being might actually amount to. I take it that Strawson is not really recommending pure passivity—literally sitting back and waiting to see what life brings to us. A more plausible suggestion—made by Robert Nozick—is that the appropriate response to the beauty of being is “to explore it, respond to it, relate within it, create, utilizing whatever we had gained thereby, and then perhaps transform ourselves still further, beginning again”

(Nozick 1989: 299–300). We should offer our “acts of responding, exploring and creating as a celebration of reality, as a love of it . . . love of life is our fullest response to being alive, our fullest way of exploring what it is to be alive” (Nozick 1989: 301). But if the proper response to the beauty of being is to explore it, actively engage with it, create in a way that builds on what we have learned and created already, then this is a response that involves projecting a meaningful, though always uncertain future on the basis of a past which is itself seen as meaningful through its providing that basis—in other words, it involves seeing our activity of exploration as a humanly meaningful project through time. And this means understanding it—and ourselves as the ones involved in this project—in narrative terms. To delight in the beauty of being involves active participation in it, and that involves cultivating virtues—of attentiveness, openness, and patience, amongst others. So it involves—“giving an ethical character to our lives.” When interpreted in a way that renders it at all plausible or attractive, Strawson’s ideal turns out to require, rather than to contrast with, ethical narrativity.

Related Topics

Chapter 14: Naturalism; Chapter 23: Psychology; Chapter 25: Moral Inquiry; Chapter 30: Arguments About Human Persons; Chapter 44: Literature; Chapter 51: Happiness; Chapter 54: The Meaning of Life

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Recommended Reading

- Davenport, J. and A. Rudd (eds), (2001) *Kierkegaard After MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative and Virtue*, Chicago, IL: Open Court. A collection of essays relating Kierkegaard to MacIntyre and modern narrative theory; several essays explore the explicitly religious dimensions of both Kierkegaard's and MacIntyre's thought.
- Hauerwas, S. and J. G. Jones (1997) *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock. A collection of essays, exploring the theological significance of narrative philosophy.
- Lippitt, J. (2007) "Getting the Story Straight: Kierkegaard, MacIntyre and Some Problems With Narrative," *Inquiry* 50, 1: 35–69. Perhaps the most nuanced of recent critiques of narrative theory; raises some directly religious issues.
- MacIntyre, A. (2007) *After Virtue: a Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd edition, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press. Develops a narrative theory of personal identity in the context of an argument for the revival of an Aristotelian teleological understanding of selfhood, ethics and society.
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- Rudd, A. (2009) "In Defence of Narrative," *European Journal of Philosophy* 17, 1: 60–75. My response to Strawson and other critics of narrative.
- Strawson, G. (2004) "Against Narrativity," *Ratio* 17, 4: 428–51. The classic recent critique of narrative theory.
- Taylor, C. (1989) *Sources of the Self*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Extremely rich account of the development of the modern understanding of the Self; argues that selfhood involves an essentially narrative orientation in moral space.

Part V

THEISM AS A
WAY OF LIFE

48

COMMUNITY

David O'Hara

Belief in a God or in gods usually has effects on the way we regard our life in community with others. For example, theistic accounts of the world help shape our self-conception, our hopes and expectations for life, and our ethical concepts. In turn, all of these have an effect on the way we think about communities and on the way we live in community with other people. Our self-conception helps us decide whether we belong in community with other people, and, if so, what sort of community we belong in. Our hopes and expectations for our own lives can make us contented with our situation as our fate, or drive us to seek support from others or freedom from oppression. Our ethical concepts nearly always concern our thinking about justice and the way we relate to those people who are in our community and to those outside it.

From all this, it should be obvious that the ways theism informs these ideas are as varied as the ways individuals and communities have regarded the relationship of religion to public life throughout human history. While the two relationships are similar, the relationship between theism and community is not identical to the relationship between religion and culture. Religion and culture tend to be related to one another through formal and more established structures of belief, tradition, and law. Some nations have formal state religions, for instance; and established religious traditions and observances, such as Christmas in most Western nations, can play important roles in shaping a nation's economy and its use of time. The relationship between theism and community is more informal, theoretical, and abstract. Because it is abstract it can be more difficult to contemplate, but just as theory always has implications for practice, an examination of this relationship can be helpful for thinking about conflicts that might arise in the relationship of religion and culture from a more neutral and philosophic standpoint.

The Advantages and Disadvantages of Theism for Community

Most religions contain some element of theism, and all cultures grow out of the life of some community. Often, theism offers a transcendent basis for continuing to respect and care for others in one's community. For instance, if one believes one's community is established and loved by the gods, one might be more inclined to safeguard that community in order to honor the gods, or in order to avoid their anger. Theism might also support a broader sense of community. For example, if one believes that all people are created by God and in God's image, this could provide support for the position that all people are worthy of equal rights. On the other hand, if one believes that God hates one's enemies, endorses the idea of slavery, or urges the subjugation of women, then the divine stamp of approval also might make those beliefs stronger.

An even deeper conflict might arise in the case of a conflict between conscience and cultural mores. The story of the Athenian statesman and general Phocion (c.402–c.318 BCE), depicted in Nicolas Poussin's (1594–1665 CE) famous painting, *The Ashes of Phocion*, provides an illustration of just this sort of conflict. Poussin's painting depicts Phocion's widow gathering up his ashes outside the city walls, as her friend stands behind her, gazing back at the temple in the city. Phocion had become a scapegoat for politicians in Athens, who had him put to death. Like Antigone's brother Polyneices, Phocion was also condemned to a second death. His body was burned and his ashes scattered so that, lacking a proper burial ceremony, his soul would never find rest. In Poussin's depiction, Phocion's widow intends to mix his ashes into a bitter potion and drink them, so that her husband's body will be buried with her own. While Phocion's widow gathers the ashes, her friend is a visible depiction of the tensions between various kinds of devotion. With whom do her allegiances lie? On the one hand, Phocion was condemned by the state to which she belongs, and if the widow's friend defies the state she separates herself from its public life, including its worship of the gods. If the gods have (as is alleged) established the state, to oppose the state's decision is to oppose the gods who uphold the state. (The early Christian apologist Athenagoras of Athens, for instance, wrote his apology to defend Christians against the charge that they were atheists—because they opposed the state gods in worshiping their own God.) On the other hand, the widow is her friend, and to abandon her in this moment would be unkind and, therefore, arguably impious, since the widow is attempting to honor the demands of religion by giving proper burial rites to her husband. Often we are told that the truest religion is the religion of love and compassion, after all. The friend's body is twisted with indecision and fear. To choose one divinely sanctioned action is to abandon one of her communities; but to choose the other is to abandon another community. The painting sums up some of the greatest questions concerning the relationship of theism to community: does theism create communities or dissolve them? Does it lead people to violence against one another, or does it so reinforce the bonds of community that it makes us willing to suffer violence out of devotion to our friends? When it creates communities, does it do so in a way that forces people to choose sides or does it provide hope and the means of reconciliation?

In order to address these problems, let me begin by making a few distinctions and by making clear some of my assumptions. First, in this chapter I am not concerned (at least not directly) with questions of law and of government, which constitute communities legally and formally. I am also not concerned with trying to describe particular religions and forms of theism. Rather, I am most interested in the way in which theistic belief in general affects our conception of what it means to live in community with other people, regardless of whether those communities are constituted by law. Second, I should point out that I am using the terms "theism" and "community" somewhat vaguely. The disadvantage of vague terminology is obvious: it can lead us to gross generalization. It is nevertheless advantageous because it permits a general discussion without getting lost in details. I do my best to avoid such generalizations while admitting at the outset that I am more interested in addressing competing claims about the relationship of theism to community than I am in addressing the many ways, small and large, in which actual communities might diverge from these general assumptions. Finally, in what follows, while I will often mention Christianity (since it is the dominant religion in the history of Western cultures), I rely chiefly on philosophical treatments of theism and community and not theological ones, because it is often the philosophers who most attempt to

provide us with a non-partisan view. This is especially important in our contemporary context since it is often the case that in any given community there is more than one possible way of construing theism. What happens when multiple theistic stories prevail or where a significant number of the members of the community are atheistic, agnostic, or anti-theistic?

Most philosophies dealing with the relationship between theism and community make one of the following three claims: that theism offers an additional, heavenly community, one that sets the theist free from secular bondage; that theism is a potential threat to community because theism establishes or fosters beliefs that are ultimately detrimental to life together; or that community in fact calls for or creates some kind of theism to supply for that community what it cannot supply for itself. The first of these beliefs is especially associated with ancient religion and the development of European thought through the middle ages. The second is characteristic of the Enlightenment and its intellectual heirs. The third has received expression in particular in several “prophetic” voices calling for communal change and renewal. Let us consider each of these in turn.

Does Theism Help Form and Sustain Community?

One of the hallmarks of most ancient societies is the importance of theism for establishing the community and its ideals. The Ten Commandments of Moses, ostensibly given directly from God to the Jews, give specific directions for their life together and not just on how they as individuals relate to God. In a sense, they establish the ground rules for a multi-dimensional community, including the community of the Jews and the community of the Jews with their God. A millennium or so later, when the Christian apostle St Paul of Tarsus arrived in Athens, he found common ground with the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers there by quoting the Hellenic philosopher Epimenides, who said “In [God] we live and move and have our being” (Cretica).

Augustine’s Concept of the Two Cities

One of the most important writers on the relationship between theism and community is the fourth-century Christian bishop St Augustine of Hippo (354–430). Augustine wrote extensively on both topics, especially in his *Confessions* and *City of God*. The *Confessions* is written simultaneously as a prayer to God, as a work of self-examination, and as an exemplary work for the edification of his Christian community. For Augustine, these three purposes fit together naturally, since each one is an attempt to address one of the communities to which he finds himself inextricably connected. Much of the *Confessions* is, as the title suggests, a confession to God of his sin and ignorance, but that confession serves a philosophical purpose as well as a theological one, by offering Augustine an opportunity to frame the most important questions that concern him. His self-examination in the *Confessions* and in several other works (notably his *On The Free Will*) reveals a complex view of the self, one borrowed from the Neo-Platonists, according to which the soul is in conflict with itself until something can bring it into its proper order. Augustine’s lower desires and appetites struggle to dominate him, while his inmost heart and mind long for God to bring order to his soul. The community of the self—that is, the community of the parts of the soul—must have something higher than itself to provide this ordering. Philosophically, Augustine identifies this with truth,

which is higher than his mind and therefore an external authority that his highest faculty naturally identifies (*On The Free Will*, Book II). If God exists, Augustine reasons, God must be at least as great as truth. Theologically, Augustine identifies divine grace as that truth that can give his soul proper order (*Confessions*, VIII).

In addition to the community of the self and the community of the self with God, there is another important community that Augustine calls the *Civitas Dei*, or "City of God." Augustine wrote about this distinction shortly after the fall of Rome to the Visigoths in the year 410. That event brought with it a wave of accusations by the Roman elite that the blame for Rome's decline rested on the shoulders of the Christians who had abandoned Roman tradition in favor of Christian tradition. Augustine countered that it is only the Christian theist who can hope to establish lasting and worthwhile community. The city of God is not a particular city, but it is rather the community of those who seek God, and it is to be contrasted with the "City of Man," characterized by merely secular hopes and ambitions. These two cities are distinguished not so much by outward forms as by the inner orientation of the heart. Citizenship in the city of God is achieved by grace, and is marked by an orientation towards God. Those who turn their hearts towards secular ambition turn away from God and, in so doing, turn away from the best kind of community by making themselves competitors with others who also seek worldly glory. Those who seek God instead of worldly gain, on the other hand, can expect to gain fellowship with the saints. Seeking God and turning away from the city of man leads the Christian to the highest kind of community (City of God, XIV.28). One important consequence of being a member of two communities is that the ideals of the city of God may be used to criticize the practices of the city of man.

This Augustinian understanding of the relationship of theism to community found numerous expressions in Europe and its cultures. Although Augustine seems to have been reluctant to identify the "city of God" with the Christian church, it is easy to see a broad acceptance of something like the two "cities" in the parallel structures of church and state. The churches of Europe were like a visible sign of a spiritual kingdom alongside the secular kingdoms, sometimes supporting the secular kingdoms and sometimes challenging them. Various reformers, from St Francis of Assisi to Martin Luther, were able to appeal to this distinction to criticize the church as well. The English Puritans who emigrated to the New World took their criticism a step further and attempted to establish a "city on a hill," that is, a community that would embody both the secular structure of the city of man and the spiritual ideal of the city of God.

Theism as a Distraction from Secular Justice

The Augustinian position has been extremely influential in Western cultures, partly evidenced by the long tradition of having the parallel structures of church and state existing in the same place. Objections to the Augustinian position have been in proportion to its influence. Edward Gibbon's (1737–94) *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* offers a position directly contrary to Augustine's in the City of God. In the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters of his book, Gibbon argues that when Rome adopted Christian theism, that theism began to destroy Rome from within. While the fifth-century Roman elites lamented the end of Roman tradition, Gibbon points to a more insidious effect of Christianity in its doctrine of the afterlife. Too much attention to the next life must necessarily take away from attention to this life. If we are really only interested in building the kingdom of heaven, we will forget to attend to the kingdom

here on earth. Gibbon's masterwork echoes the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who argued in his *Social Contract* that Christians made the worst sort of citizens. Gibbon also anticipates the arguments of a number of nineteenth-century theorists who argued that Christianity and similar theisms do more to distract people from communities than to build them. Most of these views hold that, in one way or another, theisms can be dangerous to human freedom or to advancing justice.

Merold Westphal's *Suspicion and Faith* outlines the positions of several of the most important of these nineteenth-century theorists. He describes, for example, the stance that Karl Marx took towards the gods as "Promethean atheism," after the mythical figure Prometheus (Westphal 1998: 141–2). In the myth, Prometheus steals fire from the gods who have withheld it from humanity, showing disdain for gods who do not care for us. Promethean atheism, then, is the position that if God or the gods have not contributed to human flourishing, or have proved themselves to be detrimental to human community (for example, through the actions of those who believe in the gods) then we should not worship them. This position argues against the Augustinian position that what matters most is one's relationship to God. The Promethean atheist claims that what matters most is some form of justice, enacted within the community. Marx was not alone in his Promethean criticisms of religion in the nineteenth century; Friedrich Nietzsche and Ludwig Feuerbach, among others, regarded religion as a human invention. All three agree that religion is a kind of intoxicant or a distraction from the real issues confronting human cultures. All of them offered alternative genealogies of religion, challenging the traditional view that theism and religion are the products of divine revelation. These genealogies attempted to show where we went wrong in pursuing otherworldly goals, in order to redirect our attention to concerns in this world. Promethean atheists do not necessarily agree with one another about the nature of justice—Nietzsche's vision is radically different from Marx's for instance, and emphasizes the individual over the community—but they all agree that justice should not be thought of as the property of the gods, so they all describe it in humanistic terms.

The next two centuries brought several new waves of criticism of theism along similar genealogical and humanistic lines. Both Sigmund Freud and the philosopher Daniel Dennett argue that religious belief arose as a psychological response to an uncertain and dangerous world. This means that theism is in some sense a natural belief, since it arises naturally and therefore not as a result of supernatural forces. But it is also a defensive belief, since it arose as a means of self-defense, and this defensive posture becomes an obstacle to entering into amicable community with other people. Freud holds that religion has at its root our desire to avoid pain and to maximize pleasure. Sometimes this develops into an organized form of religion that binds us to others in our community so that we avoid painful conflicts. Freud holds that this amounts to a perpetual state of discontentedness, since it means that certain desires must therefore be perpetually repressed for the sake of community. Dennett offers an evolutionary psychological account of the origin of religion, suggesting that an animal that thinks there are agents observing it is more likely to survive than one that does not think that way. Eventually this suspicion that one is being watched by unseen agents becomes enshrined in culture and develops into formal religion. Both Freud and Dennett suggest that a more mature civilization must reexamine such religious restrictions in a calm and detached manner, and begin to discard the uncomfortable ethical restrictions that these accidental theisms have placed upon us. Dennett goes so far as to say that promoting a religion is like having an unfenced pool; both are "attractive

nuisances.” His implication is that our psychological drive towards theism is self-destructive and that it generates both indifference and violence towards those who reject it. The consequences of theism could be the unintentional destruction of both individual lives and of larger communities (Dennett 2006: 298–9).

Richard Rorty offers another basis for objection to religious belief. Rorty was not so much interested in the origins of religious belief as in its consequences. Unlike earlier humanistic critics, who class all religious belief together, Rorty distinguishes between those religious beliefs that are merely ethical attempts at living a better life, and those that try to shape community directly through appeal to divine knowledge. Rorty's belief is that we humans do not have access to anything like a final version of absolute truth, and that people who claim to have such truth are usually making that claim in order to wield political power over others. Since one person's power always seems to come at the expense of another person's liberty, we should make the defense of liberty our main concern. As Rorty put it: “The only possible objection to [religious belief] can be that it intrudes an individual project into a social and cooperative project” (Rorty 2007: 35). Certain types of religious belief can make us more concerned with defending liberty by shaping the way we, as individuals, live our lives. “Social Gospels” and liberation theologies, for instance, take theism primarily as an incentive to ensure justice and freedom for others. Other types of religious belief seem more concerned with advancing metaphysical claims (for instance about the nature of the soul, of God, or of eternity) or epistemological claims (for instance about the source of knowledge in some text revealed by God or a prophet) than with freedom. Rorty argues that those types of theism are detrimental to community precisely to the degree that they distract us from trying to solve problems we can actually solve. By drawing our attention to God, they redirect us towards the futile and wasteful project of trying to think about the unthinkable. If we cannot grasp Justice itself or Truth itself, we can at least try to live lives of love. Rorty lamented the fact that Augustine linked together the Christian ideal of love as the highest human purpose with Plato's idea of the highest human purpose as knowing the truth. For Plato, the most pleasant life and the life devoted to seeking the truth are one and the same. Plato's ideal amounts to a theism—because it makes the truth into a kind of absolute and unitary God to whom one should be wholly devoted—that effectively requires everyone to have the same aims in life. Rorty argues instead for “romantic polytheism,” in which all such monotheisms are replaced by romanticism. If we adopt his “romantic polytheism,” Rorty says that we “will probably drop the idea of diverse immortal persons, such as the Olympian deities, but [we] will retain the idea that there are diverse, conflicting, but equally valuable forms of human life” (Rorty 2007: 29). In slightly different terms, theism that permits and acknowledges these different “forms of human life” is the only welcome type of theism because it is only such theism, according to Rorty, that can really help to foster communities.

Theism as Violence

At the heart of Rorty's objection is the complaint that religion not only distracts us from this world and its needs, but it also isolates us from one another by forming exclusive bonds among small groups of people. These bonds of theistic belief might appear very valuable to those who hold them, but they can be very effective at excluding those who do not hold them. In other words, theism might provide us with a unifying story that allows us to bond with one another, but it could, at the same time, engender violence

towards others who are not part of that community. It is not difficult to see an illustration of this in those who use theistic belief to justify acts of terrorism, for instance. Theism might be a natural response to the dangers of not having sufficient community, but the community it establishes can pose serious dangers to those on the outside.

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) argued that this is, in fact, precisely the dual purpose of theism: by providing the appearance of transcendent authority to the state, theism makes the state more cohesive and thus more resistant to challenges that arise from theists who think of themselves as belonging to two distinct communities. In a sense, Hobbes was uniting Augustine's two "cities" into one, in order to deprive religion of its power to divide people. If the monarch controls religious belief, then theism can no longer appeal to the fear of God in order to challenge the state. The frontispiece of the 1651 edition of Hobbes' *Leviathan* contains the famous image of a single sovereign arising out of a mass of many people. In one hand the sovereign holds a sword, the symbol of secular authority, and in the other a bishop's crozier, the symbol of ecclesiastical authority. Hobbes' religion is not the religion of revelation, however. Revelation comes through prophets, and even if prophets have heard from God, the community has only heard from the prophet, a mere mortal. All theism, then, appears to arise from the natural community, and not from some transcendent source. As such, it is like any other natural object or idea, available as a tool for bringing about a just and orderly state. Another key figure of the Enlightenment, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, similarly advocated a sort of theism as arising out of a need felt in the community. Rousseau praised Hobbes for being the first to unite the civic and the religious authorities under one head, but he criticized Hobbes for choosing to make Christianity the one religion of the state. Every particular, dogmatic religion is a form of violence against every other; theological and civil intolerance, Rousseau says, are one and the same. Nevertheless, Rousseau agreed with Hobbes that religion is necessary for a community. The solution is to form a kind of civil religion, one without dogma. His is a simple theism that is opposed to intolerance. "Wherever theological intolerance is admitted, it must invariably have some civil effect; and as soon as it has such an effect," the community dissolves, Rousseau argued (Book 4, Chapter 8). For both Hobbes and Rousseau, the solution is to develop a religion that serves the purposes of unifying the state.

The American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, in his essay "The Fixation of Belief," argued that theories like those of Hobbes and Rousseau come close to the mark but miss its center, since they only attempt to resolve the problem of religious intolerance within the community (Peirce 1955: 5–22). The problem of intolerance of other communities still remains intact in their theories. Peirce says that theism and the religious attitude help to settle opinion and arise as a result of the social impulse. We find ourselves driven together not by fear or by the appeals of mutual comfort but chiefly by the irritation of doubt and subsequent attempts to assuage our doubts through inquiry. Whatever naive opinions we might hold while we live alone, we find eventually that some other people will disagree with us. This discovery leads us into doubt about the veracity of our original positions. While some of these doubts can be settled through scientific investigation, others remain elusively out of reach. Theism can provide us with an external authority to settle those doubts and so to give order to our community. In part, Peirce agrees with Hobbes and Rousseau: the establishment of a strong community is a positive development. But Peirce warns that it is positive only if it does not regard itself as infallible, since claims of infallibility exclude those who reject those claims.

Peirce's view is that all creeds arise from such positions, and that they are all originally attempts to say which people do not count as members of the community.

In Peirce's account, as in Hobbes' and Rousseau's accounts, theism has an overall positive effect on the community, providing some comfort, cohesion or protection. Peirce differs from Hobbes and Rousseau, however, in urging that what humanity most needs is not more of such theism but the ability to grow past doctrinaire and creedal theisms into what he calls "a great catholic church" in which all people are welcome and no ideas are excluded except those that block the path of further inquiry (Peirce 1966: 6.443). Hobbes and Rousseau have been interpreted as having a cynical view of religion, and it seems fair to characterize the long-term effects of their views as ultimately leading to doubt about the truth of theism, since both of them regard theism as a product of natural communities (for example, Strauss 1959: 170–96). Peirce's view, on the other hand, holds that theism is, at its heart, correct in believing that there is a God, even if it is incorrect in leading communities to shut themselves off from other communities. The "catholicity" Peirce argues for is not a mandatory shared theism but, rather, a broad toleration for all theisms that do not infringe on the beliefs and research of others.

A Cautious Case for Toleration of Theism

If Augustine was concerned with theism as giving us our identity, the majority of the objectors to theism have argued that theism should not meddle in such affairs, or that, if it is to meddle, it should be for the aim of bringing about a more successful secular community. But what is the proper stance of such a secular community towards theism? Martha Nussbaum argues that the community of American democracy illustrates a careful balance between toleration of religion and intolerance of official theism. American democracy is characterized by a "fairness" that tolerates a variety of stances towards theism. In her view, the community is not formed or shaped by a particular kind of theism or non-theism but, rather, by an attitude towards theism in general, one designed to ensure that no one group attempts to advance an agenda for the community that is reinforced by a theistic (or anti-theistic) vision that claims the right to trump all others. Such agendas, Nussbaum argues, are likely to wind up "defining some citizens as dominant members of the political community and others as second-class citizens" (Nussbaum 2008: 5). The principle of the separation of church and state, enshrined in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution (and in related documents) expresses this attitude by making toleration the law of the land. Jürgen Habermas has recently argued that secular states must not expect their citizens to act as though theism were irrational, since secular reason has not yet established that it can preserve the solidarity of the state independent of the presence of theistic ideals (Habermas et al. 2010: 21–2). Several other philosophers, including René Girard and Gianni Vattimo, argue that this very attitude of toleration is itself a product of Christian theism (Girard and Vattimo 2006: 3–27).

Theism, Love, and Loyalty

Debates about the place of theism in contemporary secular communities are obviously far from over. Arguments against making theism a formal part of any contemporary community seem currently to have the upper hand, and probably for good reason. Whether a real threat or merely imagined, the idea of sharia law or of the establishment of theocratic governments have caused considerable alarm in Western liberal democracies in

recent years; and whatever theism's attractions for community, it has also undeniably been a major factor in historical violence.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that most of the objections to theism we have discussed are, in fact, in accord with those theistic positions that make love or loyalty the highest human aim. Perhaps it is on this point, then, that contemporary secular communities can make their peace with theism.

The thinkers of the Enlightenment attempted to turn theism into a political tool for the secular community, but others have argued that theism is the vital foundation of the love and loyalty needed to establish just communities. Cornel West has advocated a public role for what he calls "prophetic" theism in secular society. Prophetic theism, like the theism of Augustine, challenges the structures of injustice in secular communities, but without privileging what Augustine would call the "City of God" (West 1988: ix–xi, 3–12, 38–49, 257–9). Some of the most striking voices of the last few generations have been prophetic ones. Dorothy Day, Albert Schweitzer, Mother Teresa, and Oscar Romero were all strong advocates of theism as a basis for justice. Similarly, the philosopher Jean Vanier founded the L'Arche community on the basis of a covenant between people of differing abilities. Vanier's theism is broad and tolerant, but Vanier argues that these covenants are not just convenient relationships of support but, rather, attempts at becoming one with one another and with God (see, for example, Vanier 1998: 127).

This idea is arguably a very old one, but it raises a problem for the modern world. How is it possible to endorse a theistic and prophetic view of justice after the trenchant criticisms of the Enlightenment? Is it possible to propose theistic belief in a secular and pluralistic age without doing violence to the beliefs of others? Without pretending to offer a theoretical solution to this problem, we nevertheless have an example of the place of a kind of prophetic theism in the case of the Rev. Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. His writings reflect not only the strains of ancient religion (for example, his famous citation of the Hebrew prophet Amos in his "I Have a Dream" speech) but the more contemporary social gospel movement of Richard Rorty's grandfather Walter Rauschenbusch, who argued that the Gospel had implications for the positive transformation of democracy, and of the idealist philosophy of Josiah Royce.

In his book, *The Problem of Christianity*, Royce argued that Christianity and its theistic story were, in fact, the right way to think about the world. Royce held that religion is essential for community for two reasons: first, it offers a myth or story that engenders the right kind of devotion to a cause, and second, it offers a picture of absolute idealism that is the best representation of the world. To put it differently, it gives us a reason to believe and it gives us a kind of right belief about what the world is like and so how we ought to act. But the essence of Christianity is not found in the particular moral teachings of Jesus, or in the particular stories that the Gospels tell. Royce finds the kernel of Christianity in the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, which he takes to be the doctrine of community (Royce 1971: 347–402). The key to Royce's understanding of ethics can be found, then, in his concept of loyalty. Royce does not mean that any loyalty whatsoever is good by itself; rather, what we should aim at is what he calls "loyalty to loyalty," in which we choose our causes and commitments in such a way as to help others to do the same. True loyalty is to be opposed to the "war-spirit," or loyalty as it is popularly conceived. Martial loyalty divides humans into warring factions. Even though most cultures lionize martial loyalty, it is in fact opposed to the highest ideal, according to which we should act in order to nurture the loyalties of others. By growing local loyalties

that do not interfere with others' loyalties, we build chains of relationships that ultimately bind us all together in a web of interconnected and mutually supportive loyalties (Royce 1971: 273–346). Drawing on the Christian notion of *agape*, or the kind of love that seeks the good of the beloved, Royce uses the word “love” interchangeably with “loyalty.” The upshot of all this is that Christianity teaches the unity of all people in the doctrine of the Holy Spirit; and loyalty to all people in the doctrine of *agape* love. The aim of history is the realization of the “beloved community” (Royce 1988: dedication page and 323). As Royce said towards the end of his life, “I nowadays [teach] that we are saved through community” (Anderson 2006: 35).

King famously advocated the idea of the “beloved community,” an idea he evidently learned from Royce. Since loyalty and love are the highest ideals, and since the whole of humanity is bound together invisibly, King claimed that the proper response to violent opposition was not counterattack but love. If we are in fact all bound together in the Holy Spirit, then we cannot properly regard those who oppose us as enemies. Our aim, therefore, cannot be to defeat our opponents but, out of love for them, to improve them so that they might realize their place in the beloved community. Christianity, then, offers community a concept missing from humanist political philosophies: it espouses an invisible and counterintuitive but essential bond between all human beings, one that enjoins us to love one another and to live as though we were all one body.

Of course this position—that theistic idealism enhances and is essential to community—is not without its objections. One of the most obvious objections that we might raise to it is that it rests on an assumption that is not easily proven or falsified. This is not merely a criticism of religious faith, but also of the philosophical faith of the absolute idealist. This philosophical faith places considerable confidence in the human capacity to ascertain the nature of reality. The heart of any form of idealism is that the fundamental structure or nature of being is mind-like, and that all of the things we detect with our senses are, if we could see them as they most really are, not material things but somehow ideal. In most cases, this entails the further view that people, like the other things in the world, are not basically material but ideal. Material beings would seem to have separate existence, but ideal beings in an absolute mind all might be said to depend on that mind for their being, in which case they are at their deepest level not entirely distinguishable from one another. This, of course, flies in the face of our common sense experience of ourselves as individuals and of our world as being full of independently existing things.

But a second, perhaps more potent objection is not the metaphysical or epistemological notion of idealism but, rather, the ethical claims that seem to follow from it. That is, those who do not find the religion agreeable find themselves as uncomfortable outsiders in a community that wishes to make a religious or theistic view the center of its community. To put it more simply, theistic societies seem to oppose both love and loyalty to others when they impose moral beliefs on everyone in the community whether they are theists or not.

Conclusion

The relationship between theism and community is an ancient one. On the one hand, theistic belief can distract members of a community away from the real and living concerns of that community, and can be used to justify violence, both metaphorically and literally. On the other hand, there are a variety of ways in which theism can be used by communi-

ties to strengthen themselves, and it is arguably the case that communities depend on their members valuing bonds of loyalty and affection that transcend the connections that merely humanistic systems of belief propose. It is not evident that theism can be extracted from community, nor even that it is wholly desirable to do so, since abolishing it could amount to another form of violence. The task before us appears to be like the task faced by the friend of Phocion's widow, one freighted with both tension and promise.

Related Topics

Chapter 1: Western Philosophy; Chapter 4: Christianity; Chapter 14: Naturalism; Chapter 17: Evolution; Chapter 20: Philosophy of Religion; Chapter 22: Sociology; Chapter 23: Psychology; Chapter 25: Moral Inquiry; Chapter 31: Civil Society; Chapter 32: Human Rights; Chapter 36: Religious Diversity; Chapter 49: History and Experience

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Recommended Reading

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- Bellah, R. N. (1970) *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World*, New York: Harper & Row.
- A good introduction to the history of the study of religion and society in general, with a very good chapter on Rousseau's civil religion and America.
- Berger, P. (1999) *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. Seven essays that track the growth of theisms and their impact on contemporary civil communities.
- Gillespie, M. (2009) *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. Examines the development of modern political thought as a series of attempts to reformulate the heritage of medieval theism and its attendant metaphysics.
- Habermas, J., et al. (2010) *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age*, trans. C. Cronin, Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press. In dialogue with philosophers from the Jesuit School for Philosophy in Munich, Habermas argues that neither religion nor secular reason has the right to displace the other from civil life.

- Hauerwas, S. (1991) *A Community of Character*, South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press. The great theologian Stanley Hauerwas argues that the virtues necessary for communal life cannot be divorced from particular religious commitments, and that ignorance of the historical contingency of our communal existence leads to a neglect of virtue.
- Lilla, M. (2007) *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West*, New York: Knopf. Through a lively reading of the development of modern political thought, Lilla shows the dangers of political theology, and the difficulty of maintaining modernity's cherished distance between theism and politics.
- Marsh, C. (2005) *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shape Social Justice, From the Civil Rights Movement to Today*, New York: Perseus Books. Along the lines of the case made by Josiah Royce and Martin Luther King, Jr that communities thrive when they are bound together by theistic love, Marsh offers a historical survey of the importance of religion for the civil rights movement in the United States, offering a positive view of religion's past role and a case for its continued relevance in the future.
- Milbank, J. (2006) *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell. A good overview of the relationship between theology and social theory, culminating in the position that theology, properly understood, is a social science.
- Nussbaum, M. (2008) *Liberty of Conscience: In Defense of America's Tradition of Religious Equality*, New York: Basic Books. An ethical philosopher chronicles the history of the idea of religious toleration in America.
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- Stout, J. (2005) *Democracy and Tradition*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. An attempt to find a middle path between those who think that religion has no proper place in civic discourse and those who claim it is lamentably absent.
- Taylor, C. (2007) *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. A magisterial intellectual history in which Taylor argues that it is Christian theism that gave birth to the possibility of modern secular communities, and that theism has not been displaced by secularism's arrival.
- Vanier, J. (1998) *Becoming Human*, Toronto: House of Anansi Press. Illustrating his case with stories from L'Arche, the community he founded, Vanier argues that it is only in community, bound by the love of God, that we become most truly human.

HISTORY AND EXPERIENCE

Timothy Chappell

Theism with a Capital T

Mere belief in the supernatural is not the same thing as theism. You can believe in ghosts and omens and occult powers without believing in God or gods: many people do exactly this today. If you are hostile to their beliefs, you will call them superstition, a leftover (super-stitio) of the times when, for many, the point of contacting the supernatural was simply to harness such powers to their own purposes.

You can also believe in gods without believing in God. That is, you can believe in a variety of supernatural agents, none of whom is both utterly supreme and uniquely different from everything else in the world (different, indeed, from the world itself). This position, theistic but polytheistic, was occupied by the ancient Greeks and Romans. (They did recognize one deity, Zeus/Jupiter, as supreme; but, as Homer notes, his supremacy was not utter, it was simply a matter of his being stronger than other deities. In all other respects, the other pagan deities were exactly the same kind, *genos*, of beings as Zeus himself.) The closeness of their gods to mere human heroes, and the closeness of their whole theology to mere superstition, was a familiar criticism of traditional Greek and Roman religious views even before Christianity came along.

Finally, you can believe in a single and unique God, in an individual supreme being who is utterly separate from and creator of everything else that exists, without believing in a God with any particularity, or indeed involvement, in history. Monotheism, in short, can be deism, a view much favored among the rationalistic French philosophers of the eighteenth century.

The kind of theism I want to focus on here is different from all these cases. Theism in my sense, Theism with a capital T, is belief not merely in the supernatural, but in the divine; not merely in deities, but in a single, unique, transcendent God; and not merely in such a God in separation from any particular tradition, but as one fairly well-defined, albeit indefinitely fissiparous, tradition has mostly understood him. Theism in this capital-T sense has a historical particularity. Its history unites the histories of first Asia, then Europe and Africa, then the Americas, and finally Oceania, within the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic tradition. We can more or less see where Theism in this sense begins. It begins with the writing of the first chapter of Genesis, where the author makes it as clear as he knows how that the God of whom he speaks, *Yahweh*, is not just another heavenly body like the sun or the moon, but the sun and moon's creator.

There are a number of obvious contrasts between merely superstitious belief in the supernatural, pagan polytheism, deistic views, and views that come under the heading that I am calling Theism with a capital T. One important contrast for contemporary purposes is between the ahistorical nature of deistic views, and the thoroughly historical nature of Theism. This contrast manifests itself in a number of interesting ways. One, with which I'll begin, is in attitudes to the Bible.

It is often remarked that contemporary barnstorming atheists and Christian fundamentalists have some striking similarities of outlook. One such similarity is the largely unquestioning acceptance by both sides that the right way to read the Bible is what is usually called "literalism." "Literalism" means taking, or professing to take, everything the Bible says as addressed directly to us, either as historical narratives that we are bound to believe, or as commands that we are bound to obey. The idea is that both the narratives and the commands issue (or are understood as issuing) directly from God Himself; if this is our understanding, it follows that we have no right to argue with either.

One striking thing about "literalism" in this sense is its ahistoricity. It is not obvious why it would make any difference, for the "literalist," if the entire Bible had simply popped into existence some time between 9 and 12 this morning. With nearly everything else we read—and in particular, with history and with ethics—the question of when it was written, and by whom, and in what context, is of the first importance if you want to understand it well. The literalist's approach to the Bible simply bypasses such concerns, and that is one obvious reason for finding this approach implausible. Another obvious reason is the extremely familiar point that, in fact, "literalists" almost never mean their literalism literally, and that any who did would be close to certifiable. As a rule, the same people who take the word of Leviticus as sufficient authority for condemning divorce or homosexual or transvestite lifestyles are oddly reluctant to denounce the combination of different textiles in one garment, to eschew eating shellfish, or to stone witches to death on the same authority. Their atheist opponents criticize them for this selectiveness; given the literalists' own claims about what they are doing, the criticism is entirely justified.

What both the fundamentalist and the crusading atheist are missing is the rather obvious possibility of a historically sensitive reading of the Bible. To state the utterly obvious, the Bible is not a one-off act of divine utterance, a "revelation by special creation" as it were. It is the product of many human authors in many times and places; what these authors have in common is that they all take themselves to be writing, under God's guidance, a chronicle of God's interaction with humans in general, and "God's people," including themselves, in particular.

On a historically sensitive reading, the Bible is incomprehensible in isolation from some conception of "the chosen people" whose book it is. Since it is the chronicle of what believers within that particular tradition have thought God was doing in, and to, his chosen people, to read it is not, as the "literalist" thinks, to gain knowledge of a series of ahistorical propositions timelessly presented to us. It is, rather, to get a sense of how people within that tradition of "the chosen people" have experienced, or thought they experienced, God. So read, the Bible's invitation to its readers is not so much to read it and obey its commands, as to read it and join the living community that produced it and that still meditates on it—and indeed argues with it. It is not just, therefore, that no intelligent interaction with any text that was written in anything like the way we know the Bible was, could possibly just *ignore* the history of that text, as the literalist in effect suggests. It is more than that: for the most fruitful readings of such a text, its history will be an asset, not an obstacle.

Theism in this historically particular sense is quite different, then, from the ahistorical theism that preoccupies both fundamentalist Christians and also fundamentalist atheists. It is also quite different, though of course in different ways, from theism as belief in deities of the pagan-Greek or -Roman sort. There seems little difference in principle between believing in such deities and believing in fairies or ghosts: think of nature-gods like Iris the rainbow-goddess, or Persephone of the harvest, who is Freya in a different tradition. Pagan deities of this sort often arose by apotheosis (and perhaps disappeared again, as Wagner suggests in the *Ring Cycle*, through re-humanization). It is not hard to see the route from being a human hero to occupying yet another alcove in the cluttered and haphazard pantheon of (say) the Rome of late antiquity. This was a route, indeed, that mortal Roman emperors regularly trod. Even Greek generals sometimes took it too, such as the Spartan Lysander (see Badian 2006).

Another contrast between classical paganism and capital-T Theism of the kind exemplified by Christianity as it showed up in the late-Roman context is well put by the great French historian Paul Veyne. He notes first the “gigantism” of the Christian Theists’ God:

The originality of Christianity lies not in its so-called monotheism [Veyne doubts that Christianity is strictly speaking monotheistic] but in the gigantic nature of its god, the creator of both heaven and earth: it is a gigantism that is alien to the pagan gods and is inherited from the god of the Bible. This biblical god was so huge that, despite his anthropomorphism (humankind was created in his image), it was possible for him to become a metaphysical god: even while retaining his human, passionate and protective character, the gigantic scale of the Judaic god allowed him eventually to take on the role of the founder and creator of the cosmic order [as well].

(Veyne 2010: 20)

Besides this “gigantism,” it was the “human, passionate, and protective character” of the Christians’ God that, Veyne argues, set Christian Theism apart from the chaotic polytheism of the surrounding society. There one found only an ill-defined assortment of quirky, sinister, unpredictable, highly localized, and at best conditionally benign daemons. But here was a universal and omnipresent God of “infinite mercy,” unconditionally passionate “about the fate of each and every human soul, including mine and yours,” with whom what was on offer was “a mutual and passionate relationship of love and authority” (Veyne 2010: 23). As Veyne shows, there was a huge difference between the effects of the two religions on the working psychology of anyone actually practicing either. And that contrast nearly always worked in Theism’s favor.

For whoever accepted the Christian faith, life became more intense, more organized, and was placed under greater pressure. An individual had to conform to a rule that marked him or her out, as was the case in the philosophical sects of the period. But, in exchange, his or her life suddenly acquired an eternal significance within a cosmic plan, something that no philosophy or paganism could confer. Paganism left human life exactly as it was, an ephemeral amalgam of details. Thanks to the Christian god, that life received the unity of a magnetic field in which every action and every internal response took on a meaning, either good or bad. This meaning, which, unlike in the

case of philosophers, was not conferred by the individual involved, steered the believer towards an absolute and eternal entity that was not a mere principle but a great living being.

(Veyne 2010: 19)

Just this syndrome lies at the heart of capital-T Theism; Theism is just this combination of belief in an absolute and all-powerful God, utterly external and out there (“transcendent”), who is yet also intimately known within the believer (“immanent”) as moral authority, direction for life, warning or encouraging adviser, savior, friend—sometimes even as lover. To any more austere classical pagan mind, the fact that the Theist believer’s relationship with God could be conceivable in romantic or even quasi-erotic terms must seem one of the most astonishing, not to say outrageous, things about Theism. Yet the evidence, across the whole spectrum of different Theist traditions, is quite unequivocal. It is there in Hinduism: Rabindranath Tagore addresses his God as “beloved of my heart.” It is there in Islam: Jalal ud-Din Rumi writes that “Our death is our wedding with eternity.” And it is very much there in Christianity: Jesus calls himself, and John the Baptist calls him, the bridegroom, St Teresa of Avila’s *The Interior Castle* is an entire book (one of many) on the mystical marriage of the soul to Christ, John Donne says in a famous Sonnet that he will be “nor ever chaste, except thou ravish me,” Simone Weil remarks, apparently quite casually, that “le mystique tourne violemment vers Dieu la faculté d’amour et de désir dont l’énergie sexuelle constitue le fondement physique” [The mystic turns the faculty of love and desire, the physical foundation of which is constituted by sexual energy, forcibly towards God] (Weil 2006: 41) . . . and then in the Bible there is Psalm 45, and the forsaken bride of Hosea and deutero-Isaiah, and more than one Gospel parable, and “the wedding feast of the lamb” in Revelation—and the Song of Songs. (In the words of Rabbi Akiba, appeal to whom demonstrates that the idea is there in Judaism too: “The whole world is worth less than the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel . . . all the scriptures are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies”.)

It is partly this combination of immanence and transcendence that makes the Theist view so psychologically compelling. If I adopt Theism then even within little me there will lovingly dwell the God of *everything*—as in the manger at Bethlehem, or as in Mary: “For he that is mighty hath done great things in me, and holy is his name” (Luke 1.49). It is easy to see how this combination serves to give the believer a sense of the importance of his life and actions: “the vague shoreless Universe”, in Thomas Carlyle’s words (1837: chapter 2), has “become for him a firm city, and dwelling which he knows.” (Compare, too, how St Teresa of Avila often makes the “mystical marriage” sound rather like a dynastic alliance: the nun who is spiritually “wed” by Christ is achieving something like a royal match, only better still.) Many scholars think that Christian moralists make more than the classical pagans did of the virtue of humility. If they did do so, perhaps it is because those who dare to believe that their own small hearts can become the dwelling-place of the infinite God have the more need of humility.

Perhaps even the Kantian thesis that the Enlightenment deity Universal Reason can find a lodging place within me is best understood, within its historical context, as a rationalistic variation on this same theme. As I have put it elsewhere:

This is what we are expressing reverence for when we act morally, and by acting morally. In moral action, what motivates us is reverence for this: the astonishing, the almost miraculous, fact that universal practical reason itself can

be present in mortal biological animals like us, considered—as we necessarily do consider ourselves when we reflect clearly on our own natures—as “super-empirical” rational persons.

(Chappell 2010: 283)

Throughout history there runs like a thread the Theists’ version of this idea of the divine indwelling or enthousiasmos. (The word is pre-Christian Greek. As you need not have read Euripides’ *Bacchae* to realize, it is not only Theists who have believed that gods can enter the human breast. But there is the same difference as before between being possessed by some god who is merely a daemon like Dionysus or Pan, and being infused with the spirit of the god who is God Almighty.) With the cosmic importance of the quotidian as its corollary, the idea of enthousiasmos has seeded megalomania, self-deception, self-absorption, fantasism, fanaticism, spiritual fascism, and psychological manipulation and abuse. It has also been one of the principal sources of most of the permanent cultural achievements of our civilization.

At the heart of Theism, transcendence combines with immanence in the intoxicating thought that the infinite God has a plan even for my life. Constantine had this belief—Veyne quotes him telling the Council of Nicaea his reasons for thinking that he is “particularly distinguished by a special decision of Providence” (Veyne 2010: 51). (And who can say that Constantine did not have good reasons to think so?) William Gladstone had this belief: see the citations from his diaries in Roy Jenkins’ biography. Jesus and St Paul and Noah and Abraham and Moses and Joshua and Isaiah and Nehemiah and Augustine and Mohammed and Thomas Aquinas and St Francis and Martin Luther and John Calvin and John Knox and Ignatius Loyola and Blaise Pascal and Isaac Newton and René Descartes and John Woolman and John Wesley and David Livingstone and Gerard Manley Hopkins and C. S. Lewis had this belief. Every believer who has ever prayed for, or felt himself receive, divine guidance, as millions do every day throughout the world, has had this belief. Once the belief becomes credible, its attraction is almost irresistible. If I can live my life not randomly and meaninglessly, but within the great designs of an infinitely wise God who loves me and knows me better than I do myself, then why *wouldn’t* I do that? Friedrich Schleiermacher was not so far off when he famously located the essence of Theism in the sense of absolute dependence. The God of Theism is the Infinite Intimate—and also the Intimate Infinite.

This brilliant and seductive psychological appeal both to our sense of smallness and to our sense of greatness is the reason, Veyne argues, why Christianity won out in its battle with late-antique paganism. A paradigm example of Theism was set in contrast with the feeble, syncretistic, and disaggregated supernaturalism of paganism; the contrast revealed Christianity as quite simply a better-designed religion. To use Veyne’s word (and Veyne was writing as an atheist and former communist), it was a *masterpiece*.

Certain agnostic historians may think it less than scholarly to draw up a comparison between the merits of different religions. But, as I see it, to do so is not to violate the principle of axiological neutrality any more than one does when one recognises the superiority of certain artistic or literary creations, a superiority to which Constantine’s contemporaries were no more blind than we ourselves are. Why ever should the creative imagination of religions not produce masterpieces, likewise?

(Veyne 2010: 18)

The Experiential Heart of Theism

If our concern is not (like some busy contemporaries) merely to denounce Theism but rather to understand it, then it is the perspective afforded by this notion of the Infinite Intimate that we need to start from.

Most philosophers routinely do not start from any such perspective, or even get round to visiting it; perhaps understandably, given the philosophers' preoccupation with propositions. They start from a dictionary definition such as the SOED's. They take the heart of Theism to be, not a history of vivid and direct experience of an infinite God who has a plan even for finite you, but the proposition that "There is some god or gods." They then start marshalling arguments for and against this proposition. And so we get the familiar does-God-exist debates of contemporary philosophy, in which God so incongruously shows up as a possibly-missing component in the mechanics of cosmology or evolution. Or philosophers note the troubling tension between the Theist's doctrine of the goodness of God and the datum of the badness of the world, recast doctrine and datum alike as propositions, and look for a *tertium datur* to resolve the clash: and so we get the problem-of-evil literature. Or philosophers take the nub of the Theistic doctrines of God's omnipotence or omniscience, or the specifically Christian doctrine of the Trinity, to be, likewise, a matter of propositions; and here again they draw our attention to the logical difficulties attending those doctrines, considered as concatenations of propositions.

The problem with this abstractly propositional approach is not that it is wrong. Within its own proper scope and with its limitations duly recognized, there is nothing wrong with it. But the problem is that, pursued in isolation, it tends to miss the foundational role of *experience* in Theism. Experience is relevant here in at least two ways, one having to do with the *epistemic position*, the other with the *diachronic* nature, of the Theist's beliefs. I begin with epistemic position. We will get to diachronicity eventually.

Consider someone whose epistemic position, like us all I assume, is that she lives her life in the midstream of a constant deluge of the best evidence she could possibly have that external-world skepticism is false: experiential evidence. An abstractly propositional approach to external-world skepticism is bound to look slightly strange to any such person. Certainly someone in this epistemic position can *understand* skeptical doubts, can explore them with interest and engagement, can note with surprise—or perturbation—the remarkable difficulty of conclusively rebutting any argument of, for example, this form:

1. If I do not know that no evil demon is deceiving me, then I do not know that I have hands.
2. I do not know that no evil demon is deceiving me.
3. So I do not know that I have hands.

But can she, should she, take such skeptical doubts seriously? Is it a live possibility for her that external-world skepticism might turn out to be true? It is hard to see how it could be, for the reason identified by G. E. Moore in his famous paper "Proof of an External World" (1939): because her justification for denying the conclusion of the skeptical argument (3) is so much better than any justification she could possibly have for accepting its premises (1, 2). She is certain she has hands. If her alternatives are to deny that, or to deny one or other of the skeptical argument's premises, then she has

every reason to pick the second alternative. Even if she is quite unsure which of those premises is false, her certainty about the falsehood of (3) means that she is completely rational, and completely justified, in asserting “Not ((1) and (2)).” Skeptical arguments like (1–3) might set intriguing intellectual puzzles for her; they could even provide her with a livelihood writing about them. What they will not do is threaten her basic confidence that, for instance, she does indeed know she has hands.

They might threaten her assurance of that if it was a whole lot weaker, or if her epistemic position were strictly neutral—if she was antecedently disposed simply to consider each proposition on its logical merits in the abstract, and not disposed to take any proposition whatever to be any more or less sure than any other. But her position is precisely not neutral and abstract in this way. And the case of the Theist is parallel. As I put it above, the person considering external-world skepticism “lives her life in the mid-stream of a constant deluge of experiential evidence” for the existence of an external world. That sets her so far from abstract epistemic neutrality that she has every justification for weighting external-world skepticism as no more than an intriguing intellectual puzzle. Similarly, the defining feature of Theism is the Theist’s experience of an infinite but intimate God; and this sets the Theist so far from abstract epistemic neutrality that she too has every justification for weighting most of the standard budget of problems for Theism found in typical philosophy of religion basically as interesting puzzles. The epistemic reasoner is certain that the world is real, on the basis of her experience; so her question about the skeptical argument is not “I wonder whether it is sound?” but “I wonder where exactly it goes wrong?” Likewise the Theist is certain that God is real, on the basis of her experience; so her question about anti-Theistic arguments is not whether they prove that there is no God, but how exactly they fail to prove that.

It is important to reiterate that there need be nothing irrational about the Theist’s stance here, simply because her epistemic position is not one of abstract neutrality. Contemporary opponents of Theism often seem to be claiming that everyone starts, or should start, in just the same epistemically neutral place, and then can and should assess the arguments for or against Theism, in the timeless abstract, from that epistemically neutral position. We might press the questions whether epistemic neutrality so much as exists, and what use it would be to us even if it did. That aside, when someone is rationally assessing an argument, the fact that her background beliefs include very strong reasons for thinking that the argument’s conclusion cannot possibly be true is in no way an objection to her rationality. The very best arguments for external-world skepticism might be good arguments indeed. That does not mean that they should convince anyone normal. Normal people have *overwhelmingly good* evidence in their own experience that there is an external world, and perfectly reasonably take this to “epistemically outweigh” even the best arguments going for external-world skepticism. Just likewise, the best arguments against Theism might be decidedly formidable, and yet completely unpersuasive to a Theist—even a rational and fair-minded Theist. For the whole point about Theism is that it claims that there is available—individuals can have—overwhelmingly good experiential evidence that there is a God. To allow this experience to “epistemically outweigh” even the best anti-Theist arguments is no less reasonable than the analogous move against external-world skepticism.

This notion of epistemic position might help us to understand better the spirit in which Theists who live—or did live—in strongly Theist societies, Anselm and Aquinas for instance, go about the business of offering arguments for God’s existence. They do so, I suggest, in just the same spirit as contemporary epistemologists, who do not really

doubt the external world's existence for a moment, offer anti-skeptical arguments for the existence of an external world. In both cases the arguments that some given state of affairs exists are not evoked by a live doubt but, rather, by an interest in exploring alternative possible structures of argument that might or might not support the undoubted truth that some given state of affairs exists. Perhaps we might even say that arguments about God's existence are to the pre-Cartesian philosophical world as arguments about the external world's existence are to the post-Cartesian.

The notion of epistemic position also illuminates some familiar *impasses* in present-day debates about the philosophy of religion. For instance, it sometimes seems remarkably difficult for critics of Theism even to see their Theist interlocutors as rational, as dealing in the same currency of arguments as the critics deal in. It is sometimes cynically said that the conclusion is "the point in the argument where you stop thinking." Cynicism aside, different reasonable people can have different good reasons for being content to reach their rational resting-places at different lemmas. One respectable source of these different good reasons is different backgrounds of experience. So the atheist who finds some purely logical problem in the notion of God's omnipotence, e.g. that a God who "could do anything" neither could nor could not create a stone too heavy for Himself to lift, might conclude straight away that there cannot be a God. Whereas a Theist, confronted with the same problem, might respond "Oh, how interesting. So God's omnipotence must be beyond our understanding"; or "Ah, okay, so there is *one* thing that God can't do—but He is otherwise omnipotent"; or "Well, this thing has a logically inconsistent description, so of course God can't do it" (this would be my own response); or "Oh, so perhaps omnipotence is not what matters in thinking about God" (this is Peter Geach's response; he prefers to talk about "almightiness")—or in some other way might qualify her understanding of what God *is like*, without in any way weakening her confidence that God *is*. To repeat, her tenacity about God's existence might be perfectly rational; as it is based upon overwhelmingly good experiential evidence of God's existence. That evidence does not come into the argument about the coherence of the doctrine of omnipotence. But it does, so to speak, stand waiting to evaluate the argument's conclusion. And someone who lacks this evidence will perfectly reasonably form a different evaluation of that conclusion from someone who has it.

I said above that Theists can have "every justification for weighting most of the standard budget of problems for Theism found in typical philosophy of religion basically as interesting puzzles." *Most*, I said, because one standard problem in philosophy of religion is bound to be grievously more than a mere intellectual puzzle. This is the classic problem of evil.

God, says Epicurus, either wishes to prevent evils, and is unable; or he is able, and is unwilling; or he is neither willing nor able; or he is both willing and able. If he is willing and is unable, he is weak, which does not fit the character of God. If he is able and unwilling, he is malevolent, which does not fit God's character either. If he is neither willing nor able, he is both malevolent and weak, and therefore not God at all. If he is both willing and able which alone is fitting for God, from what source then are evils? Why does he not prevent them?

(Lactantius, *de Ira Dei* (c.313 ad); the first extant formulation of Epicurus' version of the problem of evil)

Evidently Epicurus' puzzle was presented as a puzzle for believers in a God of good providence, like the God of Stoicism or Christianity. (Epicurus seems not to have presented it, as people often present it today, as a puzzle for believers in God. Epicurus himself apparently believed in God, just not a providential or caring one.)

Epicurus' puzzle is an intellectual puzzle, but it is not merely an intellectual puzzle. To any feeling person, the existence of evil in our world must create something more like an emotional struggle than an intellectual puzzle; though to any thinking person, evil will pose a serious intellectual puzzle too. Theists suppose that there is a God who is good enough to want the very best for his creatures, and powerful enough to do anything He chooses. So why in Heaven's name doesn't He choose to do the very best?

One striking thing about this question is how much time Theists themselves spend asking it, and are nonetheless altogether unable to answer it. (Indeed, Theists are often not at their best—to put it mildly—when they think they *do* have an answer.)

Why standest thou afar off, O Lord? Why hidest thou thyself in time of trouble?

(Psalm 10.1)

What is man, that thou shouldest magnify him, and that thou shouldest set thine heart upon him, and that thou shouldest visit him every morning—and try him every moment?

(Job 6.17–8)

Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend
With thee; but, sir, so what I plead is just.
Why do sinners' ways prosper? And why must
Disappointment all I endeavour end?
Wert thou my enemy, O thou my friend,
How wouldst thou worst, I wonder, than thou dost
Defeat, thwart me? Oh, the sots and thralls of lust
Do in spare hours more thrive than I that spend,
Sir, life upon thy cause. See, banks and brakes
Now, leavèd how thick! Lacèd they are again
With fretty chervil, look, and fresh wind shakes
Them; birds build—but not I build; no, but strain,
Time's eunuch, and not breed one work that wakes.
Mine, O thou Lord of life, send my roots rain.

(Hopkins 1967: 106; for the opening cp. Jeremiah 12.1)

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

(Psalm 22.1/Mt 27.46)

You could call the whole Judaeo-Christian Theistic tradition a tradition of complaining at God. In one of his books Stephen Fry, himself partly Jewish, has a fictional character (also Jewish) describe the Jews as “his stupid, moaning, helpless and cosmically irritating people” (1995: 218). Perhaps that is how most Theists have seemed to God Himself.

This Theistic moaning tells us something important about Theism and the problem of evil. The critic of Theism quite often notices that she makes little or no impression on

Theists by simply announcing a list of worldly mishaps, be they ever so dire. The critic might (often does) conclude from this that Theists just display a mulish imperviousness to empirical evidence. But that is a mistake. For the Theist, the point is rather that this sort of evidence is irrelevant. In his “Essay on Nature,” John Stuart Mill wrote:

If a tenth part of the pains which have been expended in finding benevolent adaptations in all nature had been employed in collecting evidence to blacken the character of the Creator, what scope for comment would not have been found.

(Mill 2008 [1874]: 58)

But pace Mill, Theists do not arrive at their Theism by doing a “value-audit” on creation: totting up the net balance of good and evil in creation, inferring that the net balance of good and evil in any Creator would have to be just the same, and concluding either that there is a Creator and the discordant evil is only “harmony not understood,” or that there is no such Creator, or that the Creator is either morally ambiguous or just plain evil. Their Theism was, so to speak, already there before they even considered how things stand with the world. And it rests upon quite a different ground from any calculus of good and bad fortune in the world that might be devised; the ground of their Theism is the experiential one that I discuss above.

Hence Theists see the problem of evil too from a quite different epistemic position from their critics. It is not that Theists—unless they are intolerably smug and callous—do not see evil as a problem. But it is that Theists see evil as a problem in time: a diachronic problem.

Suppose you have a friend whom you trust deeply, on the solid evidential basis of your long and vivid experience of that friend’s care for you. Then one day you find yourself confronted with very, very strong evidence that that friend has betrayed you in some fundamental way. Is there only one rational response to this new negative evidence, namely to weigh it against your past positive evidence and decide which, the positive or the negative, counts for more?

If you were considering the question in abstraction from time, as a straight inconsistency in the propositions that constitute your evidence, then you might think so. But suppose you look at your evidential problem, as of course you in fact will, as a problem in time. Then you will immediately see that you have two further salient options besides insisting on reaching a verdict, right now, on nothing but the present balance of evidence. One option is to wait and see how things turn out. If you just hold off a little, then maybe a good explanation of your friend’s apparent betrayal will soon become clear to you. The other option is *to confront your friend*. Track him down, explain how things look to you, see what he has to say for himself. In short, have a good moan at him, and see what happens then.

Both these responses to a trusted friend’s apparent betrayal seem just as rational as insisting on reaching an immediate verdict about that apparent betrayal, without waiting for any more evidence to come in. Indeed in imaginable particular cases, they will often be far *more* rational. Their rationality depends, broadly speaking, on how good their antecedent reasons for trusting the friend are.

Just likewise with the Theist’s response to the problem of evil. Hers too is in no way an irrational response to the epistemic conflict confronting her as a result of that problem. For she does not find herself atemporally confronted with the raw propositions “There

is a morally perfect and omnipotent creator God” and “There is evil in the world,” and challenged to find a way to reconcile them or weigh them off against each other in the abstract. Rather, the problem of evil typically comes to the Theist, as such, within the time-series of her experience and her life. (“As such,” because she would not *be* a Theist (in the sense meant here) at the time the evil confronts her if she had not already had some transforming experience of God. But also “typically,” because while I do think the pattern I sketch here is typical, I am in no way suggesting that it is universal, or the only possible pattern. All sorts of things can and do happen.) First there is her experience of God; then there is the fact that she is confronted by some particular evil, perhaps by horrifying evil. But the time-series does not stop there. It goes on, and that gives the Theist her chance to wait and see what God might *do* about the evil that confronts her—and indeed to moan at God about it.

This is precisely what Theists do. This is what the Psalmist means by “my soul waits upon the Lord,” an attitude that he clearly thinks is not just possible, but imperative, even in the most exigent circumstances.

Behold, as the eyes of servants look unto the hand of their masters, and as the eyes of a maiden unto the hand of her mistress: so our eyes wait upon the Lord our God, until that he have mercy upon us.

Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us: for we are exceedingly filled with contempt; our soul is exceedingly filled with the scorning of those that are at ease.

(Psalm 123.2–4)

Confronted with some evil, Theists are not rationally obliged to determine on the spot whether or not that evil evidentially outweighs their experience of God. Instead, and equally rationally, they can wait patiently for their God to see what he will do about that evil—or, indeed, they can moan impatiently at their God about it (“How long, O Lord, how long?”). And this, to repeat, is what they actually do. (Often they can also do something about the evil themselves, and so provide the answer to their own prayers. Nothing I say here is meant to rule out or occlude that possibility.)

But I say “confronted with *some* evil.” The reader will notice a distinction here: between some or other specific evil that confronts a Theist in some or other specific case, and the evil in general—the sum total of evil in the whole world—that confronts the Theist in every case and all the time. Isn’t it only the latter that the problem of evil is about? No; the problem of evil is about *evil*, and both specific evils and evil in general are varieties of that. Certainly evil in general is a much bigger and less tractable problem than specific evils, and certainly Theists have concentrated, in practice, on specific evils. Nonetheless the Theist’s attitude to both general and specific evil is essentially the same. It is that you have to see it as something that happens at some point in time; and that you have to bother God about it until, at some later point in time, God has provided a resolution.

What we must completely get away from is the idea that the world as it now exists is a rational whole. We must think of its unity not by the analogy of a picture, of which all the parts exist at once, but by the analogy of a drama where, if it is good enough, the full meaning of the first scene only becomes apparent with the final curtain; and we are in the middle of this. Consequently

the world as we see it is strictly unintelligible. We can only have faith that it will become intelligible when the divine purpose, which is the explanation of it, is accomplished.

(Archbishop William Temple, quoted in Iremonger 1948: 537–8)

The last thing to say about the diachronic conception of the problem of evil is to add that in quite a number of cases of specific evils that they have experienced, Theists in practice are very likely to say that God has provided a resolution. They found themselves in some crisis or other; and they either waited to see what God would do, or bothered God about the crisis, or both; and God did do something about it. That is what Cromwell's followers, John Milton for example, said about the founding of the English "Commonwealth" in 1649; it is what most English people thought about the defeat of the Armada in 1588, and what a substantial proportion of the English thought about Bonaparte's failure to invade in 1798 and Hitler's failure to invade in 1940; it is what many believers on the run from the Nazis said about their experience of (as they saw it) being protected from capture; it is what millions of obscure believers have taken to happen in their own experience at all sorts of life-junctures; most saliently of all to a Christian, it is what Jesus' disciples said about the resurrection.

The point here is not whether such claims made by Theists are contestable or not (of course they are contestable). The point is only that they are entirely characteristic of Theism. In this respect as in so many others, Theism as it actually is could not be less like the philosophical caricatures that normally dominate debate—for instance, Antony Flew's undetectable gardener in his essay "Theology and Falsification" (Flew 2008). *Pace* Flew, Theists typically take their God to be a *highly* detectable gardener. Indeed, they think they have actually detected him.

Related Topics

Chapter 1: Western Philosophy; Chapter 3: The God of the Jews and the Jewish God; Chapter 4: Christianity; Chapter 5: Islam; Chapter 10: Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Intellectual Life; Chapter 11: Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Intellectual Life; Chapter 21: Historical Inquiry; Chapter 28: Arguments from Evil

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Recommended Reading

- Hick, J. (1966) *Evil and the God of Love*, New York: Harper and Row. A classic modern exposition of "vale of soul-making" theodicy.
- Howard-Snyder, D. (ed.), (1996) *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press. A collection of recent scholarly articles on the problem of evil.
- Lewis, C. S. (1957) *The Problem of Pain*, London: Fontana Books. A popular work, but a careful, clear, and articulate one.
- Stump, E. (ed.), (1993) *Reasoned Faith*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. A sensitive general defense of theistic belief.
- (2010) *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Evil*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. To my mind, the best book on the problem of evil in the modern literature.
- Swinburne, R. (1979) *The Existence of God*, Oxford: Clarendon Press. Swinburne represents analytical philosophy of religion in its purest form. This book is his central achievement.
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SPIRITUALITY

John Cottingham

What is Spirituality?

Despite the comparative decline of religion in contemporary Western culture, the notion of spirituality has proved unexpectedly durable. A T-shirt reportedly seen on some campuses bears the legend “I’m not religious but I’m spiritual”; the slogan seems intended to convey that the wearer, while not adhering to any religion or subscribing to any traditional religious doctrine, nevertheless has some of the attitudes often associated with a religious outlook—for example, a disdain for purely material possessions, or a sense that there is more to life than worldly success or the pursuit of financial gain.

One might conclude that the concept of spirituality is, nowadays, used to mark a contrast with the “worldly” or “material” domains. And that contrast is certainly a very long-established element in the meaning of the epithet “spiritual,” as a glance at Webster’s or the Oxford English Dictionary will confirm. But it cannot be sufficient to define the term, since we would not normally classify pure mathematics as a “spiritual” pursuit, even though it deals with an abstract immaterial realm. Moreover, a contrast with “material” does not even seem necessary in order to describe something as spiritual: someone who spends his weekends walking in the mountains or the forest—hardly immaterial activities—might say his hobby has a “spiritual” dimension, if it gives him a sense of inner peace or harmony.

What seems important here is not the degree of corporeal involvement, or its absence but, rather, that the activities in question take us beyond our ordinary routine existence and afford a glimpse into something more profound. Hence a deep appreciation of the wonders of nature or the transforming qualities of great art could be described as bringing a spiritual element into our lives. The “depth” that is in question here is not easy to specify precisely, but it seems to have something to do with our human aspiration to “transcend ourselves”—to seek for something beyond the gratifications and dissatisfactions of everyday living. The poet William Wordsworth is famous for his explorations of this theme, often in connection with those powerful intimations of meaning and value, which many people have when contemplating the beauties of nature. He speaks in *The Prelude* of those “spots of time” when some vivid experience of the natural world takes us beyond the depressing routines of normal life, and provides a “renovating virtue” whereby our minds are “nourished and invisible repaired” (Wordsworth 1972 [1805]: 478).

The label “spiritual” in ordinary usage could well be applied to the kind of complex response to the beauties of nature found in Wordsworth’s poetry. And the label might be equally apt for the music lover to use when describing those “sacred moments” when

we are overwhelmed by a great work of music, and it seems that “the human world is suddenly irradiated from a point beyond it” (Scruton 2010). But the use of terms such as “spiritual” and “sacred” in such contexts raises the question of what relationship there is, if any, between the phenomenon of spiritual experience and the truth of traditional theism. The examples just cited suggest that one does not have to believe in God in order to enter the domain of spirituality; but that leaves open the question of whether such experiences are actually intimations of the divine, albeit those having the experiences might not construe them in that way. (Compare the case of morality, where the metaphysical question of whether God is the source of goodness or of rightness is not settled by asking whether those who pursue the good or the right actually regard them as depending on God.) As far as the ordinary meaning of the term “spiritual” goes, however, its usage does not seem to presuppose any theistic assumptions. It makes good sense, for example, to speak of “Buddhist spirituality,” when referring to typical elements of Buddhist religious practice such as fasting and meditation, even though Buddhism does not involve the idea of a personal God. In modern times, we have also seen the rise of so-called “secular spirituality,” advocated, for example, by practitioners of certain types of yoga, who do not subscribe to any theistic worldview, and might be reluctant to call their outlook “religious,” even though it might fill something of the role of a religion in their lives. In sum, the general category of spirituality, as the term is used today, appears to be broader than that of religion, and is certainly broader than that of theism.

Spiritual Praxis

Though the contemporary notion of spirituality ranges over many different kinds of phenomena, there is some common ground. One is struck by the convergence in the forms of spiritual practice commonly found in the great world religions, and even in some types of secular spirituality, notwithstanding radical differences in the respective beliefs, doctrines and outlooks. For example, Buddhists, Christians, and practitioners of secular spiritual techniques might all, from time to time, seek periods of silence, stillness and meditation. This suggests that even if our primary interest is in religious and theistic forms of spirituality we might find it helpful to approach the phenomenon of spirituality in the first instance by looking at praxis rather than theory—that is to say, by looking at some of the practices religious people engage in, rather than by analyzing the content of their theological commitments. So, as a working hypothesis for investigating religious spirituality, let us include under the term “spirituality” all the practical components of religious observance that are left when one brackets off the doctrinal elements—in short, pretty much all the structured practices religious adherents engage in, qua religious adherents, when they are not actually asserting credal statements, or involved in theological analysis of the teachings of their faith. In the sixteenth century, Ignatius of Loyola spoke of “spiritual exercises,” which is a convenient label for the various religious practices most religious adherents engage in from time to time, and which are undertaken in a more systematic and formal way in the kind of seven-day retreat that Ignatius had in mind (Ignatius 1996 [1525]). This general category includes prayer, fasting, meditation, *lectio divina* (the attentive reading of Scripture), participating in communal worship, group activities such as singing psalms, individual self-examination and confession, and moments of prayer or reflective silence at key junctures of the day (for example, before eating, or before retiring).

The first point to be made about such activities is that they are not exclusively intellectual. They might well have an intellectual component, but they are not characteristically directed towards the analysis of propositions or the evaluation of doctrines. Spiritual exercises are typically polyvalent—they operate on many different levels—emotional, physical, aesthetic, moral, pre-rational, subliminal, introspective and collaborative, to name but a few categories in a very heterogeneous list. The singing of psalms, to take one key example that is at the center of the divine office in Benedictine spirituality and many subsequent monastic traditions, comprises the recitation of words learned by heart over a long period of weekly and monthly and yearly repetition. It entails a formalized structure of praxis—regulated patterns of observance assigned to set hours throughout each day. There is a physical component—prescribed movements of sitting and standing, in which the whole community participates, collectively as well as individually. It involves music, not just as an optional extra, but essentially and integrally: there is a plainsong chant, again carefully regulated, with an antiphonal structure and other laid-down forms—for example, the crucial two beats of silence at the colon or pause in the middle of each verse.

It is largely pointless to ask if the experience of a monk attending the divine office is an intellectual one, or an emotional one, or a religious one or a moral one, or an aesthetic or musical one, since *all* these elements are involved, and not just involved as separate elements, but interfused in a total act of devotion (and the same point clearly applies to many other liturgical traditions). The music, we may note in passing, is a part of this kind of spiritual praxis that can be thought of as a kind of icon or image of the whole; for the singing or chanting integrates all the aspects of the person—physical activity (of lungs, vocal chords, mouth, shoulders, diaphragm and bodily posture), emotional expression and response, sensory appreciation, intellectual grasp, and, in the examples found in the finest music, more complex kinds of moral elevation and self-transcendence.

In the singing of psalms, as far as the cognitive or intellectual aspect goes, there is of course a definite semantic content to the sentences that are chanted; but these sentences are typically not, or not very often, assertions about the truth of certain religious doctrines; they are cries of remorse, desperate pleas for help, shouts of praise, songs of thanksgiving, expressions of hope and trust, and so on. And their point is that they should work holistically, gradually transforming and perfecting the lives of those who participate; not just changing their intellectual outlook, but irradiating the very quality of their lived experience.

This very brief sketch of the features of a typical spiritual exercise might be thought to give support to the idea of the *primacy of praxis* (Cottingham 2005) when it comes to understanding spirituality. This notion, however, must be employed with care. It could be that one can, to some extent, understand spirituality while bracketing off the doctrinal content, but it is important to note that bracketing off is not the same as deleting. It is dubious to claim (as did some of the non-cognitivist philosophers of religion of the later twentieth century) that religious observance is entirely non-doxastic—that it does not involve any beliefs or truth-directed assertions about the nature of reality. Prominent among those who took this kind of line was Don Cupitt, who argued for a nonrealist account of religious spirituality, in which the God who is addressed in spiritual practices such as prayer has no independent reality but is simply “the mythical embodiment of all one is concerned with in the spiritual life” (Cupitt 1981: 167). One problem with this approach is that it is very hard to deny that certain truth-claims

are *presupposed* in the kinds of spiritual activity just mentioned; at the very least (to take an obvious point), the prayer and praise and thanksgiving expressed in a typical psalm presuppose the existence of a God, who is being thanked and praised and prayed to. That said, we need not suppose that the praxis in question requires or depends for its authenticity on our being able to unpack the precise meaning of these presupposed truth-claims, let alone on our being in a position to provide evidence which supports the claims. As centuries of theological debate have shown, the very idea of God as conceived in the three great Abrahamic faiths, a creative power that transcends the natural world, is sufficiently outside the realm of ordinary human discourse as to generate a host of philosophical issues about the precise meaning of assertions about the deity, not to mention the question of their epistemic warrant. But this does not negate the validity of the praxis.

Why not? One clue to the answer can, perhaps, be seen in the part-for-whole analogy referred to above, the case of music. Music would remain a valid human activity even if there were no musicologists, or even if (as is perhaps indeed the case) there is no clear metaphysical account available of what music is “about.” One could go further: even if that which is expressed in a sublime work of music is utterly ineffable—that is, even if no cognitive or intellectual analysis were available which could pretend to capture what is expressed—this would not shake our confidence that music of this kind is among the most valuable and important enterprises that humans can undertake. The validity of the praxis survives the inadequacy of a theoretical account of it. It might even be claimed, drawing on the “apophatic” tradition that has informed much Western spirituality (see below), that the very ineffability of what is expressed might be an indicator of its transcendent value. This line, to be sure, is not without its problems. The dubious phenomenon of “new age spirituality” (including everything from massage oils to magic gemstones and healing crystals) provides ample evidence that mystery and ineffability can be used as a cloak for questionable activities for which their (sometimes fraudulent) practitioners cannot offer any articulate justification. And this might suggest that any approach to spirituality that accords primacy to praxis over theory risks making the domain of spirituality immune from critical evaluation. But here one might invoke the maxim “by their fruits ye shall know them.” The evaluation of spiritual praxis is not a logical free-for-all, shrouded in the obfuscating mists of ineffability; it can be assessed, at least in part, by reference to the moral and psychological difference it makes in the lives of the practitioners. We shall return to this theme later.

Spirituality and the Apophatic Tradition

If one looks at the shelves marked “spirituality” in libraries or bookshops, one will often find the writings of Christian mystics, such as the *Cloud of Unknowing*, an anonymous middle English work of the mid-fourteenth century, the *Revelations of Divine Love* written later in the century by the English anchoress Mother Julian of Norwich, or the works of the sixteenth-century Spanish Carmelites, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. These can broadly be classified as works in the “apophatic” tradition, strongly influenced by ideas of the fifth-century mystic known as Denys the Areopagite (or “Pseudo-Dionysius”), who declared that God is to be sought “beyond knowing and light, in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence” (Denys 1987 [500]: 997). The term “apophatic” signifies, as Denys Turner has aptly put it, “the breakdown of speech, which in the face of the unknowability of God falls infinitely short of the mark” (Turner 1995: 19).

That God is unknowable, or cannot be fully comprehended by the human mind is a fairly standard theological idea, found in St Augustine (1857–66 [397–428], vol. 38: 360), and in St Thomas Aquinas, whose *via negativa*, or “negative way” was based on the idea that since “we do know what kind of being God is,” we have to proceed by establishing what he is not (Aquinas 1911 [1266–73]: Pt I, qu.12, art.13). (References to Aquinas are not by page number but by the section numbers (Part, question, article) which are common to all editions and translations, and by which quotations from the *Summa theologiae* are universally identified.) But what we find in the mystical writers mentioned above is not so much a theological thesis as the record of a personal struggle towards God though a slow and often painful process, as Denys the Areopagite put it, of purgation, illumination and finally union. This kind of spirituality invites us once more to focus on praxis rather than theory, and it is no accident that in the medieval mystical writers it is partly inspired by the methods of the ancient “desert fathers” who, at the beginning of monasticism, aimed to seek God through a rigorous regime of solitude, fasting, silence and prayer.

In a certain way, then, we might say that spirituality of this type sets itself against theology, or at least against an over-intellectualizing approach to the quest for God. This idea is taken up explicitly in what has come to be known as the “Platonist spirituality” of a group of Cambridge thinkers of the seventeenth century, of whom one of the most notable was Ralph Cudworth:

Ink and paper can never make us Christian, can never make new nature, a living principle in us, can never form Christ or any true notions of spiritual things in our hearts. The Gospel, that new law which Christ delivered to the world, is not merely a letter without us, but a quickening spirit within us. Cold theorems and maxims, dry and jejune disputes, lean syllogistical reasonings could never yet of themselves beget the least glimpse of true heavenly light, the least sap of saving knowledge in any heart.

(Cudworth 2004 [1647]: 60)

In spite of this, however, the Cambridge Platonists were not “mystics,” in the sense that they repudiated all explicit knowledge and understanding in favor of immersing themselves in the “cloud of unknowing.” On the contrary, in taking their inspiration from that fusion of Platonism and Christianity that had always been a significant strand in Christian thought, they celebrated reason as a divine gift, bestowed on human beings for the purpose of bringing them closer to God. As Nathaniel Culverwell declared, reason is a “calm and friendly light,” which “does never commend itself more than in agreeing and complying with faith” (Culverwell 2004 [1657]: 137f.). The theme broached here, of the reconciliation of faith and reason, is of course a perennial one in religious thought, and it serves to remind us that, for all the emphasis on emotion and on praxis that we find in the writings broadly classifiable under the heading of “spirituality,” there is nothing in such emphasis that precludes a search for God or ultimate reality that aims to integrate all our human faculties. To mistrust an exclusive reliance on reason and intellect is by no means the same as repudiating these faculties altogether.

The Psycho-ethical Dynamics of Spiritual Praxis

The need, stressed by the Cambridge Platonists, not just for abstract knowledge but for salvation accords with the point made earlier about the moral effects and purposes of

spiritual praxis; and this in turn seems to reinforce the case for saying that the difference made to the moral quality of a life lies at the very core of authentic religious spirituality. The Ignatian concept of “exercises” is significant here, calling to mind as it does, the training programs devised by athletic or sports coaches. As Ignatius puts it, “just as walking and running are exercises for the body, so spiritual exercises is the name given to every way of preparing and disposing one’s soul to rid itself of disordered attachments” (Ignatius 1996 [1525]: 283). The physical training analogy, with its suggestion of the rigorous discipline and effort needed to become an athlete, is highly significant. For the moral growth which is aimed at as one of the principal goals of spiritual discipline is not simply a steady and gradual maturing of ethical virtue and practical wisdom (as envisaged in more secular or down-to-earth moral systems such as Aristotle’s ethics (Aristotle 1976 [325 bc]), but a radical re-orientation of the self, or, to use the notion found in the Christian gospels, nothing less than a “rebirth” (John 3:3).

Not all spirituality, however, is authentic. In a recent study, Mark Johnston has described the phenomenon of what he calls “spiritual materialism”: this involves retaining our ordinary selfish desires (for security, comfort, success, etc.) and trying to get them satisfied by manipulating supposed supernatural forces. The debased form of religion known as idolatry is similar—placating the gods to get what we want. Authentic spirituality, by contrast, has it as its task (according to Johnston) to address the “large-scale structural defects in human life”—suffering, infirmity, and the vulnerability of ourselves and our loved ones to time and chance and, ultimately, death. The religious or redeemed life, Johnston argues, is one where we are morally purified in such a way as to be reconciled to these large-scale defects (Johnston 2009: 14ff.).

How might this work? A purely academic or intellectual approach might suppose that it must work on a doctrinal level: the religious believer is one who subscribes to certain doctrines such as the after-life, which reconcile him to the fear of death; or she subscribes to the idea that the right kind of prayer will produce divine interventions, to cure illnesses or avert dangers and difficulties. Now clearly many religious adherents do indeed believe in life after death, or in miracles. But there is always a danger that the wrong kind of focus on such beliefs will be the catalyst for the growth of superstitious, idolatrous, manipulative and inauthentic forms of religious observance. And it might well be that authentic spirituality puts far less emphasis on miraculous divine intervention or next-world eschatology than is often assumed by those contemporary critics of religion who construe it as a series of primitive unscientific attempts to explain or control the world by invoking supernatural forces (compare Dawkins 2006). Instead, authentic spirituality aims at nothing less than the moral transformation of a life.

It might be helpful here to take a schematic example of a life structured by the actual disciplines of spiritual praxis. Although the contrasts about to be drawn are necessarily somewhat crude and simplistic, they might nevertheless convey something of the moral and psychological dynamic of such a life, in contrast to what could be called the “secular life.” On waking up in the morning, the secularist simply gets out of bed, washes and dresses, and starts the day’s business. The spiritual practitioner, by contrast, though of course also doing these things, sets aside an assigned time near the start of each day for the collection of thoughts. This will be a time of silence and meditation. It will be a time to reflect with gratitude on the gift of life and the blessing of another day. It will be a time to recall the mistakes of the previous day, and summon the strength to improve. It will be a time of focused contemplation on the tasks to be done this day, and of awareness of the need for grace in performing and accomplishing those tasks. It will be

a time of recalling the needs of others, both of loved ones and in the wider world. Such a program of spiritual praxis need not be a matter of prolonged and elaborate devotions, but could simply be a comparatively short time of *focused and morally oriented reflection*. Of course, there is no logical impossibility in the secularist finding such a time for focused reflection each morning, but it seems likely, as a matter of empirical fact, that the chances of finding such a systematic pattern of praxis in the life of the secularist will be very small. Add to this that the praxis just described will, in the historical traditions we have been referring to (Benedictine, Ignatian, etc.), not just be a free-floating individual decision that could peter out at any time, but will take the shape of a formalized structure, where the reflections and silences are interspersed with prescribed readings of scripture and recitation of psalms and so on. In short, there will be a *vehicle* for the spiritual practitioner's daily activity—one that has been developed and refined through long centuries of tradition and continued practice, and which is designed and structured with the aim of nurturing the integration of the self, and furthering the slow and hard process of coming to greater self-awareness and moral maturity. What is more, the same kinds of difference we have been outlining between a secular and a religious pattern of living will be instantiated throughout the course of each day, for example in the habit of saying grace before meals, or in meditative reflection before retiring last thing at night. The relevant structures will also be available in moments of special stress and difficulty such as arise in the major crises of every life and even, to some smaller extent, on a quotidian basis. And they will be reinforced at a communal level, by weekly rhythms of Sunday or Sabbath observance, and by the organized patterns of collective worship that mark the regular seasons of the liturgical year, not to mention the more momentous turning points of an individual's life in the community, such as those involving birth and marriage and death.

The purpose in outlining these more or less familiar patterns of spiritual praxis is not to offer an apologia for the religious life, still less to criticize the secular way of living that tries to make do without such structures (a decision that over the long term might well call for great courage and determination). The point, rather, is to bring out how the structures of spirituality are integrally bound up with certain psychological and moral goals, not perhaps too dissimilar from what the Stoics had in mind by a "good flow of life" (Zeno 1987 [300 BC]: 394). By their rhythmical and repeated character they are productive of internal focus and attentive self-awareness; they foster psychic integration and tranquility of mind; they are geared to the achieving of a progressive and deepening moral sensibility. No doubt the picture presented above is a somewhat idealized one, representing an optimal pattern rather than a statistically typical portrait of any given actual religious adherent (who of course may often diverge radically from the ideal). But it should serve to bring out the strength of the connection between authentic spirituality and moral growth, as well as the way in which spirituality functions as a "vehicle" for the religious life, so that any understanding of that life cannot work solely at the level of an intellectual analysis of theological doctrines, but needs to take account of the patterns of moral and spiritual praxis that energize it and give it shape.

The Prospects for Spirituality in a Post-religious World

The contrasts just made between the secular and the religious life naturally raise the question of whether there might not be an authentic form of spirituality within the framework of a typically modern, wholly naturalistic worldview. A number of recent

writers have argued for this possibility, notably the French moral philosopher André Comte-Sponville, in his *L'esprit de l'athéisme*, translated as *The Book of Atheist Spirituality*. Comte-Sponville completely rejects traditional theism, and firmly subscribes to the view, as he puts it, that the natural world is the “totality of reality” and that the supernatural “does not exist.” Rejecting the idea of divine creator, he is drawn instead to an immanentist view: “everything is immanent to the All”—the capital letter, he adds, is due to “convention rather than deference” (Comte-Sponville 2008: 137). So there is no God here, only the whole of Nature; but nevertheless there emerges throughout the book a strong wish to preserve “the sacred”—the existence of “a value that seems absolute, that imposes itself unconditionally and can be violated only on pain of sacrilege or dishonor.” The long tradition of spirituality, Comte-Sponville acknowledges, is a primary vehicle for preserving this vital sense of the sacred and the moral imperatives that go with it. And so he describes himself as “faithful” to that tradition. Fidelity, in his sense, is “what remains when faith has been lost.” And “renouncing a God who has met his . . . demise . . . does not compel us to renounce the moral, cultural and spiritual values that have been formulated in his name” (2008: 18, 21).

It is obviously correct that becoming an atheist does not entail abandoning morality. But Comte-Sponville’s idea of preserving “fidelity” to a spiritual tradition in the absence of faith nonetheless raises serious problems. As argued above, the religious structures of spirituality provide a vehicle for the articulation and reinforcement of certain important moral values and sensibilities; yet for the vehicle actually to operate in an individual’s life there evidently has to be participation. And this returns us to the central question of the connection between spirituality and theistic belief, which has been in the background of our entire discussion. If the truth of theism is presupposed (see above) in the traditional Jewish and Christian and Islamic forms of spiritual praxis, then it is by no means clear how an atheist could participate in the relevant forms of devotion with integrity. “Fidelity” to a tradition implies more than merely acknowledging its existence, or regarding it as a rather impressive legacy, in the way a tourist might admire the splendid ruins of an ancient Greek temple.

A further problem for Comte-Sponville’s idea of “fidelity” to a spiritual tradition is that he evidently wishes to retain moral and evaluative concepts, drawn from that tradition, to which as a naturalist he is arguably no longer entitled—in this case, notions such as “absolute,” “sacred,” “unconditionally imposes itself,” and the like. This raises a complex issue in moral philosophy that is beyond the bounds of the present chapter, namely whether a purely naturalistic ethics can support the traditional idea of the unconditional normativity of moral values—the idea that they exert a compelling demand on us, whether we like it or not. In fact, for Comte-Sponville himself the “absolutization of ethics,” as he terms it, turns out in the end to be “illusory”: the idea of absolute external demands on our conduct is a “projection on to Nature” of “what exists only within ourselves” (2008: 178). But it seems unlikely that such projectivism will be able to underpin the genuine normativity or authority of moral values, or to embody fidelity to the spiritual tradition which has shaped so many elements of the Western cultural landscape. For the spiritual praxis that has enriched so much of our collective history, the practices of prayer, meditation, *lectio divina*, and the whole structure of private and public worship, has been, in the Western tradition, inextricably linked to the Judeo-Christian idea of our *creatureliness*—the notion that we humans cannot create values all on our own, and that our very existence depends on a creative power, source of all goodness, truth and beauty.

Admittedly (as was noted above) there are alternative forms of spirituality that are not committed to the theistic idea of a loving and wholly good creator. Buddhist spiritual praxis, for example, is based on the concept of *anatta*—the idea that the self is an illusion and that there is nothing beyond a constant flow of impermanent conditions that arise and pass away. So the spiritual exercises in Buddhism are designed to release the mind from craving and attachment, and enable it to dissolve into a blissful state in which there is a kind of oceanic merging into the impersonal flux that is all there is. Such a spirituality belongs to a worldview that diverges radically from the Judeo-Christian conception, with its morality of unconditional requirements that calls us to orient our lives towards the Good—albeit it does nevertheless support a strong ethical tradition which makes the virtue of compassion central to living a good human life. This example suggests that the notion of a non-theistic spirituality is certainly not incoherent in itself; what does seem problematic is Comte-Sponville's idea of remaining “faithful” to the specifically Western structures of spirituality once the theistic metaphysical framework which supported that tradition has been dismantled and discarded as rubbish. Perhaps alternative structures might be devised, thus dispensing with the need for fidelity to a tradition; but as has emerged at many points in our discussion, spirituality characteristically involves a systematic and organized template of practices and routines; and it will not be easy to invent such a template from scratch. Nor, on the other hand, will it be easy to graft a new, wholly naturalistic spirituality onto the rootstock of the Western theistic tradition, with its associated morality of unconditional demands.

Spirituality and Conversion

We noted above that a principal goal of spiritual praxis has always been taken to be the moral transformation of the agent. Many of the great writers in the tradition of Western spirituality make the point, explicitly or implicitly, that such transformation is not merely an intellectual matter, but characteristically involves a radical shift of emotional perspective. It seems part of the very nature of the religious life that it characteristically springs from practical and emotional involvement rather than from intellectual analysis alone.

The seventeenth-century French philosopher Blaise Pascal provides a striking illustration of this point. Pascal's famous *nuit de feu* or “night of fire” on November 23, 1654—the intense religious experience that led to a radical change in his life—generated in him what he describes as feelings of “heartfelt certainty, peace and joy.” But the God who is the source of these feelings is “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,” not the God of “philosophers and scholars” (Pascal 1962 [1670]: 913. (References are not to page number but to the extract number in Lafuma's edition, which has become the standard way of referring to the *Pensées*.) Faith, for Pascal, must arise in the context of a living tradition of practical religious observance, rather than from debate and analysis in the seminar room. This is perhaps part of what he meant by his famous dictum *Le coeur a ses raisons que la Raison ne connaît point* (“the heart has its reasons, which Reason does not know at all” (1962 [1670]: 423)).

The conversion experience Pascal describes was sudden and intense, and there are other cases (perhaps most famously that of St Paul on the road to Damascus, as described in Acts, Chapter 9), which appear to have been even more dramatic and shattering. But Pascal also canvasses the possibility of a much more gradual process, where the change comes about slowly (though once again not through intellectual reflection

alone). What Pascal envisages is a change resulting from willed self-immersion in spiritual praxis, despite an initial position of neutrality or even skepticism:

You want to cure yourself of unbelief, and you ask for remedies: learn from those who were hampered like you and who now wager all they possess. These are people who know the road you would like to follow; they are cured of the malady for which you seek a cure; so follow them and begin as they did—by acting as if they believed, by taking holy water, having masses said, and so on. In the natural course of events this in itself will make you believe, this will train you.

(1962 [1670]: 418)

The idea here seems to be that deliberate involvement in spiritual practices (going to church, taking holy water and so on) will gradually train the initiate into a pattern of belief. The actual verb employed by Pascal for this “training” process is *abêtir*, normally used of the taming of an animal. So the techniques of spirituality might seem to be envisaged as a kind of conditioning process, one that will bypass the intellect and make us receptive to religion, just as a horse is made receptive to bit and bridle by a process of habituation.

To interpret Pascal along the lines just suggested is to construe the practices of spirituality as operating in a very mechanical way. No doubt there are some respects in which spiritual praxis does indeed involve habituation, though that is of course true of the moral life generally (cf. Aristotle 1976 [325 bc]: Bk II). But to suppose this is the whole story seems inconsistent with the idea of God as offering salvation as a “free gift” (Romans 6:23) that humans can accept or reject. A more plausible and religiously sensitive interpretation of Pascal is offered by Ward Jones, who construes him as advising the doubter voluntarily to place herself in a position where the freely given grace of God has the opportunity to operate. The resulting process need not be supposed to be entirely mechanical or to bypass our fully human faculties of perception and reason. Rather, as a result of making oneself receptive (for example, by going to church, participating in the liturgy and so on) the subject gradually places herself in a position where evidence for the truths of the faith becomes available—the very evidence that might before have been ignored, or simply unnoticed (Jones 1998).

If this is right, Pascal envisages religious belief not as a requirement to be met *before* starting to participate in spiritual praxis but, rather, as the *destination* towards which the praxis might lead us. The suggestion is that the individual, after an initial decision to embark on the road, prior to evidence, may gradually be opened to experience that will subsequently, if all goes well, confirm the appropriateness of the initial choice. If this should seem to be a very tortuous and complicated process, it is worth noting that many of the crucial changes in our lives do in fact follow just such a pattern. In the choice of a spouse, or a career, or a decision such as whether to start a family, it is seldom, if ever, possible to make a rational decision “up front,” from a cold, detached and scientific perspective—from the perspective of an observer demanding what Paul Moser has called “spectator evidence” (Moser 2008). Rather, there has to be an initial decision to embark on a set of practical commitments whose credentials, at that stage, cannot be fully established. Only later, if one is prepared to make oneself open and vulnerable in the kind of way a detached spectator never is, will one be in a position to receive the free gift of evidence that (if all goes well) might confirm the validity of the initial choice.

To sum up the role of spirituality in conversion on this “Pascalian” analysis, the idea is that it offers a set of practices which we can embark on, even from a position of partial doubt, in order to make ourselves open to the possibility of change. In a somewhat similar way to what happens in the moral life generally, we develop understanding not principally by the intellectual analysis of theories, but through disciplined patterns of habituation, which progressively foster our powers of moral and spiritual discernment. This, if the theistic worldview is indeed true, will be one way in which conversion can come about; and there will be a later stage, if all goes well, when praxis and theory will become interfused, and our daily patterns of behavior become incorporated into an ever fuller and more explicit grasp of the significance of divine grace in our lives.

Conclusion: Theism, Spirituality and Philosophy

To close this survey of the relationship between theism and spirituality, it is perhaps appropriate to draw some philosophical lessons. One such is that a major element in the Christian legacy that has so profoundly shaped modern Western culture is a tradition of spirituality that takes us into a different dimension from the theoretical debates and intellectual disputes which form the staple diet of academics in general, and philosophers in particular. It encourages us instead to reflect on how religious allegiance is never simply the adopting of a set of hypotheses or doctrines, but always involves accepting a practical call to change one’s life. What the disciplines of spirituality offer in this context is a method, an organized structure of praxis which can serve as the vehicle for progress away from disordered and wasteful living towards greater knowledge and love of the good.

This acknowledgment of a lived, practical dimension to the religious life need not be thought of as falling outside the province of philosophy; on the contrary, if the dimension in question is indeed an integral part of what it is to have religious allegiance, its recognition must form part of any sound philosophy of religion. To acknowledge this does not at all mean a move “away from reason”; as the Cambridge Platonists argued, it might be perfectly possible to pursue the goals of truth and rationality while at the same time deepening one’s understanding of the moral and practical demands of religious faith. But abstract argumentation cannot be the whole story. Just as it would be absurd for a philosopher of music to confine himself to the abstract theories of musicologists, without any attention to the transforming power of music in the lives of those who experience it, whether as performers or listeners, so an exclusive concentration on “theism” (if by that is meant theories about the existence and nature of God) cannot possibly constitute the whole of the philosophy of religion. And if that is right, it seems to follow that there is a certain impoverishment in the philosophy of religion as currently practiced in many university departments. However that may be, a philosophical examination of the nature and role of spirituality in human life could serve to remind us of the complexity and richness of our human nature, and so recall us to what has always been one of philosophy’s principal tasks, striving towards a better understanding of ourselves and our place in the scheme of things.

Related Topics

Chapter 29: Religious Experience; Chapter 38: Education; Chapter 44: Literature; Chapter 45: Music; Chapter 47: Narrative; Chapter 48: Community

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Recommended Reading

- Coakley, S. (2002) *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender*, Oxford: Blackwell. A stimulating collection of essays which illuminates aspects of spirituality from a broadly feminist theological perspective.
- Holder, A. (2005) *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, Oxford: Blackwell. A useful reference work.
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HAPPINESS

Suzanne Lock

The question of what makes for a happy life has been a subject of philosophical enquiry going back to Aristotle, but has been relatively neglected in modern times. Meanwhile, the last fifty years has seen a burgeoning scientific interest in happiness. Insights into the factors that affect happiness are emerging from a growing sociological and psychological literature. One of the significant factors in the mix that has received considerable attention is religion. Religious people are happier than their non-believing neighbors. In this chapter, I review the results of the recent studies on the relationship between religion and happiness, and consider the theories proposed to explain the link. The evidence supporting an association between religion and happiness is strong, but only recently has attention been paid to the question of why there is an association. There have still been relatively few empirical studies into the causal direction and mechanisms underlying the relationship, so I shall also consider the direction of future research. One key issue that will be explored is whether there is a relationship between theism and happiness. Are religious beliefs, and in particular a belief in God (or gods), part of the explanation of the association between religion and happiness, or are theistic beliefs irrelevant to the association?

The Methodology of Happiness Studies

I will start with a few preliminary comments on methodology. First, the concept of happiness is ill defined. There are many conceptions, ranging from Aristotle's account of eudaimonia as the virtuous life lived in accordance with the human function, to Mill's account of happiness as pleasure. Further, there is little consensus among philosophers, either historically or presently, on the nature of happiness. This is clearly an issue of great philosophical importance, but not one that I shall be discussing further. (For a contemporary discussion of the nature of happiness see Haybron 2000.) The focus of this chapter is not to give an account of the nature of happiness, but to investigate the connection between happiness, religion, and religious belief. In particular, I shall focus on recent developments in the scientific study of happiness. This scientific study shares a broad methodological approach to the study of happiness, which carries with it assumptions about the nature of happiness. It is controversial whether the scientific community is making defensible assumptions about the nature of happiness, but a detailed discussion and defense of those assumptions would involve too great a diversion from the matter in hand. Therefore, for the purposes of this chapter I will be accepting the notion of happiness to be found in the current scientific literature. This is necessary in order to fully consider the many interesting results emerging from that literature, but

it could well be that the scientific notion in current use ultimately requires considerable modification.

In order to overcome the difficulties of defining "happiness," scientific study has developed the notion of subjective well-being (SWB). SWB is an operational term, defined in terms of self-reports to questions about well-being. While these self-reports can be based on general well-being (for example, "How do you feel about your life?"), it is more common to break them down into a number of components, with questionnaires or interviews asking several questions for each component. The core components of SWB are life satisfaction (for example, "How well do you feel your life is going overall?"), domain satisfactions (for example, "How well do you feel your job/family life is going?"), positive affect (assessment of positive moods and emotions) and negative affect (assessment of negative moods and emotions).

Scientific studies have adopted the terminology of SWB, but conclusions are often made about happiness. In this literature "happiness" is sometimes used to refer to overall SWB. However, it is often used to refer to a sub-set of the components, with positive and negative affect combined under the heading "happiness," and life and domain satisfactions combined under the heading "life satisfaction." This variability in the usage of the term "happiness" makes comparison across studies difficult. In addition, a number of techniques are used for measuring the various components of SWB, which has the effect of further complicating attempts at comparison. The majority of these are based on self-reports, but can be supplemented with physiological indicators, such as salivary cortisol levels (see Dinan 1994). Among the most common self-report methods are the Oxford Happiness Inventory, a 29-item questionnaire with a 4-point scale for responses (Argyle et al. 1989), the Depression-Happiness Scale (McGreal and Joseph 1993), the Faces Scale, in which participants are asked "Which face comes closest to expressing how you feel about your life as a whole?," followed by a choice of seven diagrammatic faces (Andrews and Withey 1976), and the Ladder Scale of General Well-Being, a 10-point scale of life satisfaction (Cantril 1967). I shall not be offering any opinions on which of these scales best captures the notion of happiness, but wish to draw the reader's attention to the plurality of measurement techniques and issue a word of warning against simple comparisons or generalizations across scales.

The difficulty of measurement also arises with regard to religion. As with well-being measures, this can sometimes be simply a matter of a self-report in response to a general question (for example, "How religious are you?"). However, there have also been attempts to break down different components, eliciting responses on questions about frequency of church attendance, frequency of prayer, belief in God, relationship with God, and so on. A distinction is often made between religious activity components (for instance, church attendance) and belief components (such as belief in God). Attempts to standardize measures of religiosity include the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity (Francis and Stubbs 1987), and the Religiosity Scale, which measures the intensity of Islamic beliefs and practice (Suhail and Akram 2002). Once again, generalizations and comparisons across scales should be approached with caution.

The Religion–Happiness Association

The general picture emerging from the scientific study of happiness is that SWB correlates significantly with religion. Meta-analysis of the literature by Witter et al. (1985) showed a significant positive correlation between religion and SWB, with religion

accounting for 2–6 percent of the variance of adult SWB. Ellison (1991) reports that religious variables account for 5–7 percent of life satisfaction variance and 2–3 percent of the variance in affective well-being. Religion, it seems, improves believers' assessment of how their life is going to a greater extent than it affects their moods and emotions. This could be because the effect of religion is not on the events which occur to us but, rather, on the way that we view and assess those events, thereby disproportionately benefiting life satisfaction ratings over moods and emotions (which reflect the events in our lives more directly). Alternatively, it is possible that religion improves not only believers' assessment of how their lives are going, but actually improves how their lives go. The evidence does not distinguish between these explanations, but there is scope for further studies to investigate both the stability of these results and the mediating mechanism(s).

In addition to the general association between religion and happiness, a number of studies have found a correlation between happiness and particular aspects of religion. Ellison (1991) reports a correlation between religious certainty and SWB, Pollner (1989) connects happiness to the intensity of relationship with the divine, Poloma and Pendleton (1991) found that happiness correlates with prayer experiences, and Ellison et al. (1989) show association between the devotional and participatory aspects of religion and well-being. These more fine-grained associations might give us some insight into the reasons why the general link between religion and happiness holds, but there are significant methodological difficulties with drawing any such conclusions from these data. In particular, the studies do not sufficiently rule out the possibility of alternative correlates providing the causal mechanism. Religious beliefs and behaviors are mutually supportive. Religious rituals promote religious beliefs, and religious beliefs prompt religious activities. It is not possible to assume that a correlation between religious certainty, for example, and happiness means that it is religious certainty that accounts for the connection between religion and happiness. The reason for this is that it might be the case that religious certainty is also correlated with some other feature—say frequency of prayer—with prayer being the mechanism bringing about both the certainty and the happiness. If we want to understand the reasons for the correlations, we need studies with a greater degree of control for other correlations, which might provide competing explanations.

A large proportion of the evidence supporting the positive correlation between religion and happiness is from Christian samples, using the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity and the Oxford Happiness Inventory (see Robbins and Francis 1996; Francis and Lester 1997; French and Joseph 1999; Francis and Robbins 2000; and Francis et al. 2002). These results all show a correlation, but other methods have demonstrated that the connection is not always this clear. Robbins and Francis (1996) show that the relationship between religion and happiness is sensitive to the precise measures and samples studied. In particular, results of studies that use the Depression-Happiness Scale as the SWB measure have yielded considerably more uncertainty. Lewis (2002) reports no correlation between the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity and the Depression-Happiness Scale.

The majority of studies that provide the existing evidence have been carried out in Christian communities in North America and, to a lesser extent, Europe. This raises the question of whether the correlation is also found in other cultures and religions. This is important because the data considered so far only support the conclusion that there is a correlation between Christianity and happiness. Is this just a special case of a wider

correlation between religion and happiness, or is there something particular about Christianity? In an attempt to answer this question, several studies have been carried out in other religious communities. Suhail and Chaudhry (2004) report a study carried out on a Muslim population in Pakistan. They found a significant correlation between religiosity, measured using the Religiosity Scale, and SWB, measured using the Faces Scale and Ladder Scale of General Well-Being. The correlation was significant for both components of SWB (happiness and life satisfaction). The Religiosity Scale was broken down into beliefs and practice indicators, revealing that there was no significant difference in their relationship to either happiness or life satisfaction. A study of Muslim Kuwaiti undergraduates by Abdel-Khalek (2006) found that religiosity accounted for around 15 percent of the variance in happiness. This study used general self-rating of both happiness and religiosity, indicated on a 10-point scale. These results show that the connection between religion and happiness is not limited to the Christian religion. Religiosity is also an indicator of happiness for Muslims. However, this does not necessarily demonstrate that the same mechanism is responsible for both correlations. There are some differences between the data sets; the percentage variance in happiness attributable to religion is higher in the Muslim sample than the Christian sample (15 percent in the Muslim sample, 2–6 percent in meta-analysis of largely Christian samples), and there was no variability between belief and practice indicators, or life-satisfaction and well-being measures in the Muslim sample, whereas there was variation in the Christian sample.

There are a number of possible explanations for the differences between the samples. They could be attributable to differences in measuring techniques, or it could be that the mechanism connecting religion and happiness is triggered more by Islam than by Christianity. If either of these accounts of the differences between the two samples is correct, the same explanation of why religion is correlated with happiness might apply to both Islam and Christianity. Alternatively, the differences between the two samples could be indicators of underlying differences in the mechanisms mediating the link between religion and happiness, in which case there will be no account of the correlation between religion and happiness which applies across religions. Further investigation into why the correlation holds should help to reveal whether the same explanation holds across religions. In addition, it would be interesting to see whether the association holds in all religions, and whether it makes a difference whether the religion is dominant or marginal within the sample group.

While cross-religious studies and comparisons are theoretically desirable, there are methodological difficulties concerning variation in measurement techniques that cannot be easily eliminated. The use of standardized methods for measuring SWB should enable some useful comparisons, although caution should be taken with regard to translation issues and cultural differences affecting self-reports. The measurement of religiosity is much harder to standardize across religions. Variations in the nature of religious practices and beliefs make it difficult to meaningfully apply a standard measure across religions, and even across differing denominations within a religion. Regular attendance at religious ceremonies is more important in some religious groups than others. Individual prayer is key for some, whereas others emphasize group prayer. Taking measures of these activities will provide different information for different religions about the level of religious engagement of a subject. There are also translation issues concerning religion-specific terminology. Questions posed only in non-specific terminology are unlikely to supply adequate data, but the use of specific terminology about the religious beliefs and practices of a given group will compromise standardization of measurements

as it is not possible to straightforwardly translate such terminology. Despite these methodological difficulties cross-religious data are an important resource for investigating the mechanisms mediating the religion–happiness correlation because the systematic variation in religious beliefs and practices could be exploited to test hypotheses.

Explaining the Correlation

The correlation between religion and happiness has been reported since the 1960s (see Wilson 1967), but investigation into the explanation of the correlation has only really taken place in the last twenty years. There are many reasons why we might be interested in this explanation. First, intellectual curiosity demands an explanation. Second, we need to know the causal direction of fit. If happy people are drawn to religion, or unhappy people lose religion, the link is significantly less interesting than if being religious makes people happier. It strikes me as *prima facie* implausible that happy people are more likely to be religious, not only because religious recruitment typically appeals to those suffering hardship or distress, but also the ubiquity of religion in many places, and the fact that most are born into a religion rather than joining as an adult, suggest that the religious are not a self-selected bunch. It might be more plausible that unhappy people leave religion, for example, when bad life-events create both unhappiness and loss of faith. The religious might not be self-selected, but maybe the irreligious are. I shall follow the literature in assuming that the causal direction is that of religion increasing happiness, but it is important to point out that this has not been demonstrated. One of the reasons why the current evidence does not resolve this issue is that there is a lack of longitudinal studies, following the progress of individuals over time.

A final reason for interest in the explanation of the link is that if we know how religion increases happiness, we can develop methods for increasing happiness. Increasing happiness is not necessarily a good thing. It has been reported that people who are depressed assess both the world and themselves more accurately than those who are not depressed (for reviews see Alloy and Abramson (1988) and Taylor and Brown (1988)). The accurate assessment of the depressed has become known as “depressive realism,” while the systematic over-attribution of qualities to oneself and over-optimistic assessment of the world is known as the “positive illusion.” These phenomena imply that we cannot always have both accuracy and happiness. This could be taken to show that as accuracy is not necessary for well-being we should be less concerned with accuracy, but there might be times when an accurate understanding of ourselves or the world is more important than happiness. This could be because our lives depend on us getting it right, or it could be because it matters to us to get it right. Increasing happiness isn’t a good thing if it requires us to abandon the quest for truth. So, should we abandon the pursuit of happiness in favor of the pursuit of truth? Clearly not. But neither should we abandon the pursuit of truth in favor of the pursuit of happiness. Both happiness and truth are valuable. All things being equal, both values are to be pursued. The evidence for depressive realism and the positive illusion shows that the values of happiness and truth are at times in conflict, but this does not force us to reject one of those values. Increasing happiness is *ceteris paribus* good for us, so having the means to increase happiness is surely valuable even if we ought to be selective when to deploy those means. An understanding of how religion increases happiness will also provide an understanding of means by which happiness can be increased. This could be by promotion of some component within religion, or by considering ways of developing equivalent mechanisms outside of religion.

With this final reason in mind, one distinction that will be significant when considering the explanation of the correlation is the distinction between religious activity and religious belief. This raises the question of which is responsible for the correlation between religion and happiness. Is it religious activities that promote happiness, or is there something about the beliefs of the religious that increases their happiness, or both? An answer would suggest how happiness could be increased within religion; either by increasing religious activity, or by developing religious beliefs, or both. It also has an important bearing on the issue of whether a similar effect could be created outside of a religious context. If religious activity is the component responsible for the correlation, it would be quite plausible that similar activities could be developed outside of religion. However, if it is the belief systems of the religious that are responsible for the correlation, it would be less plausible that a non-religious substitute could be developed. There is some evidence that is relevant to this issue, but it is far from decisive, with some support for every possible explanation.

In favor of religious activity as the potent component, Diener and Clifton (2002) report a Gallup survey in which having prayed in the last day corresponded with life satisfaction more highly than either belief in a soul or belief in God, Myers (2000) reports a correlation between religious attendance and happiness (but without a comparison with belief), Gartner et al. (1991) found that the association between religion and mental health benefits is stronger when religion is measured by actual religious behavior than by attitude scales, and Witter et al. (1985) carried out meta-analysis which revealed that religious activity is more strongly related to SWB than religiosity. Witter et al. suggested that their results support the view that religion influences SWB via social integration, rather than ego transcendence.

In favor of belief as the potent component, Ellison (1991) suggested that religion is beneficial because it provides an interpretive framework, enabling believers to make sense of their experiences and giving them greater feelings of control and security. However, it is not clear that this suggestion is well supported by the evidence.

As a further complication, there is evidence that suggests there is no difference between religious activity and belief when it comes to bringing about happiness. Diener and Clifton (2002) report data from a World Value Survey of forty-one societies, in which there was no significant variation in the correlations between SWB and church attendance, frequency of prayer, or belief in the importance of God. Also, as reported above, in Suhail and Chaudhry's (2004) study in Pakistan no significant difference was found between beliefs and practice as indicators for either happiness or life satisfaction.

While this evidence makes it impossible to draw any firm conclusions, it seems that the overall picture lends tentative support to the idea that religious activity is the main component responsible for the correlation between religion and happiness. This does not, however, tell us a great deal about the mechanism responsible for that correlation, other than maybe narrowing the field of possibilities somewhat. In the following sections, I will consider some of the proposed mechanisms.

Social Support

One of the ways in which religion might increase happiness is by increasing social support. This seems plausible as religion is not, typically, a solo activity. Religious communities provide social support both directly, through pastoral care systems, and indirectly, by providing opportunities for social interaction and relationship building. There is

strong evidence linking social support to SWB (see Argyle 1987; Sarason et al. 1990), so it is likely that this mechanism accounts for at least some of the variance in SWB attributed to religion. Further support for this theory comes from evidence that suggests that those in great need of social support benefit more from religion. Moberg and Taves (1965) found that church membership has greater benefits for those who have lost other social support (retirees and widows), and McGloshen and O'Bryant (1988) reported that recently widowed women who worship regularly report more joy in their lives than those who do not worship. Social support is clearly provided by religious activity rather than religious belief and is a mechanism that is not dependent on a religious context. Religion might be a reliable means of developing social support, but any other method that yields social support would be just as efficacious in the production of happiness.

Physical Health

Health was among the first correlates of happiness reported by Wilson (1967). It is unsurprising that health should bring happiness, or at least that the absence of health should reduce happiness. What is more surprising is that health contributes less to happiness than one might imagine. In a study that followed accident victims who had suffered paralysis Brickman et al. (1978) found that this significant reduction in physical health had less impact on reported happiness than expected, with accident victims reporting a short-term moderate reduction in happiness with near control levels of happiness after six months. It seems that with respect to the state of our physical health we are better at adapting to a new state than we think, so while we judge that health is an important component for well-being we typically over-estimate this importance.

Health is not as important for well-being as we think, but that is not to say that it is irrelevant. There remains a link between health and happiness, particularly when health is measured by self-rating rather than objective measures, suggesting that how we perceive the state of our health is more important for well-being than the actual state of our health. This suggests two ways in which religion could impact on SWB via health; (i) religion could be linked to objective physical health, or (ii) religion might provide a framework in which believers have a more positive perception of their health, either by being more emotionally accepting of their physical state or by being more optimistic about their recovery of good health.

There are numerous studies showing a correlation between religion and physical health (see Koenig 1997; Matthews and Larson 1997; Koenig and Harvey 2002). It has been suggested that this correlation with physical health could be due to the lower incidence of drinking and smoking in the religious members of many of the sample populations (North American Christians). Ellison and Levin (1998) report literature review analysis showing a small but robust correlation between religion and health even when social ties, health behaviors and socio-demographic variables are controlled for. However, Levin (1994) demonstrated that while there is strong evidence of an association between religion and health, it was insufficient to conclude that religion is causally efficacious in bringing about health benefits.

Mental Health

Mental health benefits are also associated with religion (for example, see Ellison and Levin 1998; Gartner et al. 1991). The case for a causal connection between religion and

mental health is stronger than with physical health due to a longitudinal study by Levin et al. (1996) showing a reduction in mental illness as a result of participation in religious activities. The measure of mental health used in this study was depressed affect. This is significant when considering the connection between religion and well-being as depressed affect is typically considered a negative component of SWB, for example in measures such as the Depression-Happiness Scale. If religion reduces depression we do not need a further explanation of how that leads to an increase in SWB; a reduction in depression constitutes an increase in SWB.

The relationship between religion and depressive disorders is clearly key to understanding the connection between religion and well-being, but the focus on depression leaves a number of further questions open which have received less attention. Is the association between religion and mental health limited to depression and mood disorders, or does religion also have a wider mental health benefit? For example, is religiosity associated with a lower incidence of psychotic disorder? Further study into the extent of the association would be beneficial.

The mechanisms underlying the correlation with mental health and physical health might well be different, with social or cognitive mechanisms much more likely to play a role in the case of mental health. Fredrickson (2002) suggests that the mechanism that mediates the religion-happiness correlation is positive emotions. She speculates that religious practices illicit positive emotions, which in turn lead to improved health and well-being. She also suggests that religious activities that are based on belief in a greater meaning in life are the most beneficial in bringing about positive emotions. These suggestions have a strong theoretical basis, but have not yet been the subject of empirical study. Two other suggestions that have received more attention and which I will consider in more detail are that religion aids coping, thereby enabling the religious to recover from negative life-events, and that religion provides a purpose in life.

Coping

A possible explanation of the correlation between religion and happiness is that religion aids coping (the active role of a participant in response to negative events). There are several studies that lend support to this idea. Friedrich et al. (1988) found that religious mothers of developmentally challenged children suffer a lower incidence of depression. Ellison (1991) and McIntosh et al. (1993) report correlations between religion and the retention or recovery of happiness following divorce, unemployment, serious illness and bereavement. Folkman (1997) reported that spiritual beliefs and giving ordinary events a positive meaning were related to positive states in HIV caregivers. It is not possible to determine from this evidence whether these effects are due to religious beliefs affording coping mechanisms, or the result of the increased social support afforded by religious communities. If the studies distinguished between religious activity and beliefs in their measurement of religion, this could help resolve the issue. A stronger correlation with beliefs would support the coping mechanism account and a stronger correlation with religious activity would favor a social support account. The situation would be complicated further if both a belief-based coping mechanism and an activity based social support mechanism are in operation, in which case some other means of investigating the mechanisms would be required. Only if we know how religion improves coping can we consider how to increase the effect, and consider whether the mechanism could be exploited by non-religious belief systems or activities.

Purpose in Life

It has been suggested that providing purpose and meaning in daily life (see Pollner 1989) and during major life crises (see McIntosh et al. 1993) could provide an explanation of the correlation between religion and happiness. French and Joseph (1999) tested this hypothesis by measuring religiosity (Francis Scale), happiness (Depression-Happiness Scale and Oxford Happiness Inventory) and purpose in life (Purpose in Life Test, see Crumbaugh (1968)). They found that happiness is strongly associated with purpose in life, and that when purpose in life was controlled for, the association between religiosity and happiness no longer remained. This is one of the best investigations into why the religion-happiness correlation holds, but there remain many questions unanswered. For example, is purpose in life a result of religious activity, or beliefs? Are other life purposes just as good, or is there something special about a religious purpose in life?

Direction of Future Research

The explanations considered above all have some degree of theoretical and evidential support, but we are still a fair way from having a detailed explanation of the mechanisms that mediate the association between religion and happiness. What direction should future research take, to give a better understanding of how religion is related to happiness?

Diener et al. (1999) recommended a greater focus on the interaction between internal and external factors. The idea is that behind the course-grained association between religion and happiness, there are likely to be more fine-grained associations if we look at how different people benefit from religion. For example, Allport and Ross (1967) suggest that we can distinguish between the extrinsically orientated and the intrinsically orientated. The former group, being focused on the extrinsic value of activities, will see religion as a means to non-religious ends and are more interested in the practical and social benefits of religion than in the meaning and purpose of life benefits, whereas those who are intrinsically orientated will pursue religion for its own sake and are more interested in the meaning and purpose of life benefits. This strategy is likely to reveal a more complex picture, where the benefits of religion, and mechanisms that bring about those benefits, vary according to personality type.

This approach, which seeks a finer grain of analysis, is also taken by Pargament (2002). He finds that some forms of religion are more beneficial for well-being than others. He also suggests that all forms of religion have both advantages and disadvantages, which benefit different groups in different ways and to different degrees. In particular, those in situations of stress find religion particularly valuable, and those who integrate religion into their lives benefit more than those who don't. However, those who are more religious also suffer more from the stress of religious struggle and experience disadvantages to a greater degree. For example, in Catholic women diagnosed with breast cancer, greater religiosity was associated with increased emotional distress (Alferi et al. 1999). This approach of identifying more fine-grained associations, in addition to considering both positive and negative correlations, will surely improve the body of evidence.

To gain a full understanding of the relationship between religion and happiness, future research needs to address a number of questions. Does the association between religion and happiness hold across all religions? How, if at all, does the relationship

vary between religions? Is the association between religion and happiness causal, and if so in which direction? What are the mechanisms responsible for the association? How do internal and external variables affect the efficacy of these mechanisms? Are there also negative associations, and if so what are the responsible mechanisms? In order to investigate these questions, future research needs to (i) be cross-cultural and cross-religion, (ii) study individuals over time, as well as taking population samples, (iii) take a fine-grained approach to variables, and (iv) involve controls to exclude competing causal explanations. In addition, theoretical work needs to be done on developing detailed accounts of the possible mechanisms, to generate hypotheses for empirical testing.

Related Topics

Chapter 48: Community; Chapter 50: Spirituality; Chapter 53: Irony; Chapter 54: The Meaning of Life

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Recommended Reading

- Bortolotti, L. (ed.), (2009) *Philosophy and Happiness*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan. Collection of essays on the philosophy of happiness.
- Diener, E. (2009) *Culture and Well-Being: The Collected Works of Ed Diener, Social Indicators Research Series*, vol. 38, The Netherlands: Springer. The second in a three-part series of the works of leading happiness researcher, Ed Diener. This volume includes his research on cultural universals and differences in well-being.
- Eid, M. and R. J. Larssen (eds), (2008) *The Science of Subjective Well-being*, New York: Guilford. Anthology providing a broad overview of current scientific knowledge on subjective well-being, including the connection between SWB and religion.
- Haybron, D. (2008) *The Pursuit of Unhappiness: The Elusive Psychology of Well-Being*, New York: Oxford University Press. Stimulating and insightful discussion of the nature of happiness.
- Veenhover, R., *World Database of Happiness*, Erasmus University Rotterdam. Available at: <http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl>. A fantastic resource, providing comprehensive information on scientific studies of well-being and life satisfaction.

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SEX

Brenda Wirkus

Introduction

No discussion of theism—nor of religion or spirituality more generally—stands complete without some discussion of its relationship to lived experience. And no discussion of lived human experience stands complete without some consideration of embodied experience, of which sex (and sexuality) are a part. But theism and sex do not always fit together comfortably or relate to one another well. In many instances, especially when theism takes the shape of institutionalized religions, the relationship is fraught with mistrust and unease, misapprehensions and suspicions. The purpose of this essay is to trace some of the sources of that discomfort, to clarify the terms of dispute, and to analyze some recent strategies proposed to preserve theistic integrity while acknowledging contemporary sexual mores and practices.

Sex and Theism

An initial examination of the characteristics of theism does little to illustrate why the topic of sex should prove so often volatile and divisive. Theists minimally subscribe to a few broad and general tenets: belief in a personal deity who demands/deserves our respect and/or adoration, and who created the world from which that deity is both separate and engaged (Hawkins 1950). Engagement with the world distinguishes the theistic God from a deistic God. The conviction that God is separate from the world (transcendence) distinguishes the theist from the (immanentist) pantheist. Neither of those notions entails any claims about sex.

Perhaps, then, the notion of God as person might prove more helpful in making sense of our concerns about sex. Typically, a theist understands God to be a personal being. But God is spirit rather than body, a spirit wholly good and wholly powerful as well as creator of the universe. And, as spirit, sexless. Thus God and humans are unlike in those respects.

A yet more fruitful line of inquiry might be into the connection between God and the world, a world that God created and yet from which God is so very different. An explanation of that connection entails philosophical inquiry into cosmology, natural theology, and metaphysics. A subset of that inquiry would be the determination of how belief in God relates to living one's life, requiring practical inquiry into ethics and politics. Those activities move us beyond individualized versions of theism to an immense historical tradition of theism institutionalized within organized religions. And it is there that we can find plenty of sex or, at least, discussions thereof.

Sex and Institutionalized Theism: Tensions, Ambivalence, Contradiction?

In the West, theism has most often appeared in institutional form as one of the three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. And until recently in the West, Christianity has been the dominant expression of theism as both spiritual force and practical moral guide.

Not only is there no univocal position about sex and sexuality shared by the three Abrahamic traditions, there is not even a single stance within any one nor within the various denominations and sects and divisions of them. For almost every instance of the celebration of the human person—composite of body and soul—as a divine creation made in God’s image, one can find the expression of suspicions and fears about the “body” part of that person as well as a desire to control it and its sexual functions. Those expressions take different forms; some come from scripture, and some come from authorities whose work has been informed by philosophical as well as scriptural sources. We shall attempt in what follows to examine each to some extent, focusing primarily on the more manageable scriptural corpus.

From Scripture

It is easy and tempting—but unfair—simply to blame all of theism’s difficulties with sex on Platonic philosophy. Some blame probably does belong there. But some clearly pre-dates any Hellenistic influence upon Judaism. And some comes from the writings and the practices of the Jewish community long before Judaism knew much about Greek philosophy.

One does not find much direct commentary on sex and sexuality in the Hebrew Scriptures. There are few scriptural sources for sexual ethics in either the Hebrew or the Greek Scriptures. One can, however, detect an ambivalence towards the body and towards sex. On the one hand, the body and its capacities are the products of a good and loving creator; therefore, they must be good. On the other hand, fallen humanity is self-centered and anti-social, and capable of using the body in ways that cause harm to self and others. And fallen humanity, remembering its Edenic origins, experiences shame and regret. That shame is often attached to bodily and, specifically, sexual functions.

The Hebrew Scriptures begin with creation accounts in the Book of Genesis. There, already, we can feel the tensions that come to characterize religious understandings of the body:

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness . . .” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply.”

(Genesis 1.26–8)

Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.”

(Genesis 2.18)

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

(Genesis 2.24–5)

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

(Genesis 3.6–7)

Biblical scholars offer multiple readings of these passages. It is not our intention here to engage in discussions best left to those scholars but, rather, simply to point to apparently contradictory views of nakedness (and, thus, the body) before and after the fall. Before the fall, the naked body was perfectly acceptable. After the fall, it needs to be covered. Did sin make the body, and thus by extension sex, bad?

Augustine will later read Genesis as a story about the disorder brought to the soul as an effect of sin, and consequently to the destruction of human relationships. We shall turn to that reading in the next section. For now, however, it suffices to suggest that the original sin that affected all of humanity following Eve's and Adam's eating of the forbidden fruit transformed the human person, a created good, into something flawed and thus not quite so good any more.

One possible reading of the remainder of the Hebrew Scriptures, and indeed one understanding of the Jewish tradition more generally, is that the history of the world is in fact a history of the covenant between God and (human) creation. Many of the practices and rituals of Judaism, understood in this light, attempt to make God's presence available to the community. Some of those rituals might be understood as a way to purify that which has been sullied by sin. One can certainly read the book of Leviticus that way. It begins with instructions about sacrificial offerings ([chapters 1–3](#)) and then moves to penitential offerings for sins committed ([chapters 4–5](#)). These sacrifices return the sinner to a right relationship with God. In that context, later chapters (6–11) define “clean” and “unclean” food sources and provide the foundation for Jewish dietary restrictions. Beginning with chapter 12, “clean” and “unclean” are applied to humans:

If a woman conceives and bears a male child, she shall be ceremonially unclean seven days; as at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean . . . Her time of blood purification shall be thirty-three days; she shall not touch any holy thing, or come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purification are completed. If she bears a female child, she shall be unclean two weeks.

(Leviticus 12.2–6)

Chapters 13 and 14 provide advice for restoring lepers, chapter 15 for men who have had “discharges” from their flesh. Chapter 18 begins with an admonition:

You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not follow their statutes. My ordinances you shall observe and my statutes you shall keep, following them. I am the Lord our God. You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances; by doing so one shall live. I am the Lord.

(Leviticus 18.2–5)

That chapter next prohibits approaching anyone to uncover nakedness (18.6–18) and then lists what have come to be other standard forbidden practices:

You shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness while she is in her menstrual uncleanness. You shall not have sexual relations with your kinsman's wife, and defile yourself with her. You shall not give any of your offspring to sacrifice them to Moloch, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord. You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. You shall not have sexual relations with any animal and defile yourself with it, nor shall any woman give herself to an animal to have sexual relations with it: it is perversion.

(Leviticus 18.19–24)

Two phrases recur throughout Leviticus: “You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances” and “I am the Lord your God.” Leviticus is full of instructions designed to ensure, recover, and/or maintain the order of the community and, thereby, a right relationship with God. But what is especially noteworthy is the designation of “clean” and “unclean” as related to bodily functions. Male functions can be unclean, specifically those called “discharges.” Those discharges, while not specified, appear irregular and not ordinary. Leprosy, a disease, renders one unclean. But wholly natural female functions, i.e. menstruation and childbirth, are also unclean. These are not diseases; they occur regularly and are not extraordinary. They are functions of a normal and female body. And so what appears to be happening in Leviticus is not simply a listing of ritual practices and prohibitions but an inscription of a gender hierarchy according to which female bodies are polluted (unclean) in a way in which male bodies are not. And so ritual reinforces a social structure that, by the time of Moses, had become intensely patriarchal. In fact, one might even suggest that the prohibition against homosexuality, which is later deemed “unnatural” because of its failure to produce offspring, is initially problematic because it reduces one of the male bodies to the (socially inferior) position of the female. That would also then explain why Lot, in the Sodom and Gomorrah story of Genesis 19, offers his young virgin daughters to the crowd in place of the male visitors whom they intended to rape. Rape of Lot's daughters, on this reading, is acceptable while (homosexual) rape of visitors to whom one has extended hospitality is not.

The Hebrew Scriptures, however, do not restrict themselves to legalistic prescriptions and proscriptions. Contrast the book of Leviticus, early in the Torah, with one of the later “Writings,” the Song of Songs sometimes called the Song of Solomon. That is not one of the priestly books, and it is clearly not an instruction manual prescribing rituals to preserve the community. Nor is it like any other biblical literature. It does not have a clear plot; it is more like a drama or a collection of poems. And it speaks of highly erotic human love, love conjoined with sex:

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine,
your anointing oils are fragrant. (1.2–3)

Ah, you are beautiful, my love; ah, you are beautiful; your eyes are doves . . .
Our couch is green; the beams of our house are cedar, our rafters are pine.
(1.15–17)

My beloved is mine and I am his; he pastures his flock among the lilies.
(2.16–17)

Upon my bed at night I sought him who my soul loves. (3.1)

Let my beloved come to his garden and eat its choicest fruits. (4.16)

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If one offered for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned. (8.6–7)

Scholars have speculated that these poems resemble, structurally, Egyptian love songs and Syrian wedding songs (Bandstra 1995: 449). Others have noted that God is not mentioned anywhere in the text. Song of Songs has been used by Jews and Christians alike to argue that human sexual love is the model of the covenant between God and the people of Israel or between Christ and the Church. Perhaps so. But, as Bandstra points out:

The inclusion of the Song of Songs within the canon is at some level an affirmation of the essential created goodness of sex. Certainly through the history of the formation of the canon this posed problems. Perhaps the rabbinic and early Christian allegorizing was really just a rationalization for including this erotic poetry in the canon. They knew all along the goodness of human love and realized the importance of canonically affirming it.

(Bandstra 1995: 449–50)

The Jewish tradition sees sex as a good because of its creation by God. It is a good that is subject to regulation and laws and social needs. Structured within marriage, it can be a participation in the covenantal relationship between God and his people. Its purpose is procreation, i.e. “Be fruitful and multiply.” On the other hand, pleasure rather than procreation is the message of the Song of Songs. One might read that latter text as anomalous, then, in more than just the ways cited above. It is also about individuals engaged in a relationship that does not necessarily have any communal repercussions. Leviticus and Songs are two interesting texts whose complementarity is not readily evident and whose apparently contradictory messages speak to the reader: The body is good, as it is created by a good God. The body is a source of pleasure. The activities of the body have a social dimension to them, as bodies live together in community. Communal life requires regulation and control of those bodies so as to ensure social stability. Therefore, not all pleasures are acceptable, nor are all bodily activities. Cherish the body. But control the body. And only act in those ways prescribed by God through the tradition.

The Greek Scriptures are even more meager in addressing sex and sexuality. In Matthew 19 Jesus describes marriage as ordained by God and decrees divorce unacceptable:

Some Pharisees came to him, and to test him they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?” He answered, “Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ and said

'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

(Matthew 19.3–7)

Furthermore,

He said to them, "It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery."

(Matthew 19.8–9)

Thus, marriage is a good, designed by God and protected by the law. But in that same book, celibacy also appears for the first time as a good. Jesus asks his followers to leave their families and reject the norms of ordinary (married) Jewish life:

Another of his disciples said to him, "Lord, first let me bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead."

(Matthew 8.21–2 and Luke 9.59–60)

Then Peter said, "Look, we have left our homes and followed you." And he said to them, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life."

(Luke 9.28–30)

And, finally, in a continuation of the marriage/divorce/adultery theme from Matthew 19:

His disciples said to him, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." But he said to them, "Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can."

(Matthew 10–12)

Jesus would have been familiar with the Essenes, a radical group of Jews who lived in community in the desert and who practiced asceticism and celibacy. They became known upon the discovery of the *Dead Sea Scrolls*, which contain a version of the Hebrew Bible, a manual of discipline for the community, and "war scrolls" (Ariel 2007). That community preached an apocalyptic vision of the end days. They represent a departure from the norm of Jewish life and practice. Celibacy will come to dominate the later Christian imagination far more than the Jewish one. Jesus never married, and he called his followers to leave their families even if they were married. But there appears little besides Jesus' command to justify the celibacy he advocates for his followers. It might reasonably be argued that celibacy allowed its practitioners freedom from obligations that would tie them down and prevent them from a life of preaching and service. On

the other hand, later in the Christian tradition, celibacy will be understood as the more perfect way, based upon a reading of the body as corrupt or corruptible. The Greek Scriptures contain no indication of that understanding.

Ironically, of course, if Jesus was the son of God, divine himself, then his embodiment—his incarnation—should serve as a positive reinforcement of the notion that the body is good. But his incarnation was, first of all, as a male body. And, second, from all evidence Jesus never married. That, again, leaves us with some mixed messages about the fundamental goodness of the body (i.e. whose body?) and an ambivalence about sex.

Scholars often cite as the central message of Jesus, and, by extension, of Christianity, the idea of love. The ethical sensibility that one can derive from the Greek Scriptures in places such as Matthew's Sermon on the Mount ([chapter 5](#)) is always a social sensibility, one concerned with living peacefully together in society and loving even one's enemies. But any development of a sexual ethics based upon that particular articulation of love will have to account for such harsh sayings as "everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5.28) and "anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery" (Matthew 5.32).

Perhaps it is too much to expect consistency from a scriptural tradition that spans two millennia and consists of contributions from various disparate groups of people. Perhaps, too, it is too much to expect systematization from loose and youthful institutions just beginning to formalize themselves. Perhaps, then, we should look to the subsequent development of those institutions.

From Authority and Tradition

To attempt to provide for authority and tradition the detail of scholarship just completed above would prove to be a daunting task indeed. Fortunately, it has been done, at least through the time of Augustine, in Peter Brown's monumental (nearly 500-page) *The Body in Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (1988). His is the first in the list of recommended readings at the end of this chapter. We shall instead here just highlight some major themes and consider Paul, Augustine, and Aquinas.

The development of the institution of Christianity happened on a number of fronts during the first century of the Common Era. Most important of the early disciples was Paul (5–60 CE), formerly Saul of Tarsus, a convert from Judaism who spoke Greek and was a Roman citizen. He traveled widely and visited any number of Greek cities. He never knew Jesus but preached his gospel to the "gentiles," the pagans who lived in those Greek cities. He wrote letters to their inhabitants, letters of direction which often mention "the flesh."

For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. (Romans 7.19)

So then, I of myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. (Romans 7.25)

To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. (Romans 8.6)

And, famously, from 1 Corinthians 7:8–9:

To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.

These brief quotations provide enough to generate centuries, even millennia, of suspicions about sex and about the body. For it is in Paul that we first clearly see the dichotomy of flesh and spirit, as clearly as it appears in Platonic philosophy. Here too we see that the spirit is required to control its unruly body. And, finally, marriage is a remedy for weakness and lack of self-control. This disciplinary approach is new in the history of infant Christianity. Marriage, while clearly an expression of patriarchy and the dominant male in Judaism, was still held to be an indisputable good. Marriage was about a way of life and social practices. Here, in Paul, sex and marriage are about individuals and sin; the individual Christian needs a rational soul to dominate his/her unruly body.

Many recent arguments have been made to suggest that our historical reading of Paul has been inaccurate (see, among others, Jordan 2002 below). Be that as it may, it has been a reading that has informed the history of Christianity from the first century onwards. And it signals a shift in Christianity to a negative view of sex and marriage that veers sharply away from the early, albeit ambivalent, Jewish understanding. From that view one can trace a line that leads ultimately to Puritanism and the Shakers.

Paul's execution by the Romans on or around the year 60 CE did not stop the spread of the new religion. However, his spirit/body dichotomy and his disavowal of the flesh did not immediately catch on with Romans. Virginity for women was fine; the vestal virgins, after all, had a social place. But to expand that virginity to men was more problematic. And so the clergy remained married through the time of Ambrose and Jerome and Augustine. Peter Brown's work can serve as a useful guide for understanding the works of the former two, in particular how their theological understandings slowly shifted to a position that validated sexual differences, sexual hierarchy, and male domination, and ended a period of "intimacy with devout women as colleagues, disciples, and mentors" (Brown 1988: 382).

With Augustine (354–430 CE), that was never a worry. Augustine treasured his male friends more than the concubine with whom he shared a son and thirteen years of faithful intimacy. Augustine's sexual profligacy has probably reached the category of urban legend. His "autobiography" exaggerates for dramatic effect; he was, after all, a rhetorician. He is often read as someone who sowed his oats throughout his youth and then, after his conversion, wanted no one else to share in the fun. He was undoubtedly raised in a neo-Platonic tradition that made him suspicious of the body and wary of desire. His understanding of sin as disorder and disruption make him the perfect candidate for appropriation by some of those primarily Protestant faith traditions that disparage the flesh. At times he sounds a lot like Paul. "Who, what sort, am I – what if not evil, in what I do, or (if not in what I do) in what I say, or (if not in what I say) in what I want" *Confessions* 9.I.1 (Augustine 2006 [397]: 185). But for Augustine evil was a Platonic absence, absence of right order, absence of focus, absence of loving what one ought to love and, instead, loving either the wrong things or the right things too much or not enough.

Augustine's *Confessions* trace his journey to maturity through careful introspection. He admits to being "without love to this point. I was in love with loving. Unaware

of my own needs, I resisted what would make me less needy. I wanted something to love, since I was in love with loving” *Confessions* 3.I.1 (Augustine 2006 [397]: 41). He understands that everything is about love but cannot figure out where to find it. And he understands, as confessed in book eight, that both the cause and the result of sin is a flawed will. His discussion of the theft of the pears in *Confessions* 2, so obviously paralleling his discussion of Adam’s sin in his *Literal Commentary on Genesis*, leads Brown to conclude that, for Augustine, the problem with sex is not so much tied to the body as to the will. Augustine believed that sex and friendship were conjoined in the relationship of Adam and Eve in Eden. Adam’s sin was to choose friendship with Eve over God’s command, just as Augustine’s was to choose to steal with his friends rather than to do what was right. As a consequence, sexual intercourse after the fall became severed from the tenderness and friendship that had characterized it beforehand. (Brown 1988: 402) The solution for Augustine is not virginity or sexual renunciation as a purification of the evils of the body. The solution, instead, should be the realignment of soul and body into their natural and happy original relationship, much like the happy original relationship of Adam and Eve. It is not sex that is bad for us; it is our disordered will that seeks the wrong things in the wrong proportions and in the wrong ways.

Both Brown and Wills present a reading of Augustine that is far less negative than the one that has survived through the tradition and through subsequent appropriations. Augustine obviously and certainly sees humans as suffering from a flawed and sinful nature. But that nature is more a result of acts of will than of acts of the body. And, when the sinner is engaged in sexual excess, his/her failure is not due to the body but to a refusal to choose right order.

No discussion of authority and tradition is complete without including Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), the systematic philosopher and theologian who put together, in his *Summa Theologiae*, the most thorough-going compilation of insights into God, humans, and the world. But he speaks very little about sex. What he develops that is relevant to our purposes is the concept of natural law, which becomes the foundation for determination of the morality of sexual (and other) actions. The concept of natural law can be traced to both the Stoics and Aristotle. In question 90, article 1, of his *Summa Theologiae* I–II, Aquinas argues that law is something pertaining to reason. And reason, i.e. philosophical reflection, will serve to ground all of Aquinas’ comments about law. In article 2, following Aristotle, Aquinas argues that law is always directed to a good and the good, for humans, is happiness. Aquinas’ work, like Aristotle’s, is profoundly teleological. All of reality is structured by finality and purpose. Within that context, law is a “dictate of practical reason coming from the person who has charge of a perfect community” (Question 91, article 1). Natural law is the participation in the eternal law, i.e. the providential governance and order of the universe.

The first principle of practical reason—the primary precept of the law—can be formulated in the following manner: “Good is to be done and pursued and evil is to be avoided.” All the rest of the precepts of the natural law are based upon this principle.

(*Summa Theologiae* I–II, Question 94, article 2)

Reason is our guide in the determination of action. As in Book V of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aquinas contends that all things have a specific nature, and goodness comes from acting in accordance with that nature.

It is not difficult to see, then, how Aquinas' work becomes relevant to questions about marriage, family, and sex. Sex is directed towards procreation. Marriage and the family are the venue where that occurs. Aquinas considers the family in Book III of his *Summa Contra Gentiles*. From Chapter 123, section 1: "not only that the society of man and woman of the human species, which we call matrimony, should be long lasting, but even that it should endure throughout an entire life." From section 3: "For the female needs the male, not merely for the sake of generation . . . but also for the sake of government, since the male is both more perfect in reasoning, and stronger in his powers." Again, shades of Aristotle. And, from sections 5 and 6: "It is contrary to the natural instinct of the human species for a wife to be separated from her husband . . . Furthermore, the greater that friendship is, the more solid and lasting it will be." Aquinas continues in this section to consider procreation as the "natural end" of marriage aimed at the good of the preservation of the species.

And so the tradition uses Aquinas to confirm/affirm beliefs about marriage as being between one man and one woman for the purpose of procreation and for the rest of their life. One can see how this philosophical formulation can be used to justify prohibitions against artificial contraception (because denying the natural end of the act of intercourse, procreation) and homosexuality (because those acts cannot result in the natural end of procreation and thus become "unnatural").

Strategies to Rehabilitate the Traditions

The sexual revolution that has captured our imagination since at least the 1960s and probably, more accurately, since the cultural depression of the 1920s following World War I, has left traditional institutionalized religions in a quandary. More and more they try to maintain their role as viable moral guides. But, if Michel Foucault (1978) is right, their role as disciplinary enforcer has been lost to the state over the course of the past few hundred years. In addition they have witnessed, during the past century, a decline in church attendance in the West, a loss of membership to more fundamentalist sects, and a widespread ignoring of their sexual prescriptions and proscriptions. These phenomena have generated a series of responses ranging from holding the line to rewriting the tradition. In this final section we shall engage in a brief review of a few of these strategies and suggest lines of inquiry for interested readers to pursue.

In the Catholic Christian tradition, attempts have been made to rehabilitate Thomas Aquinas for a modern age. Leo XIII's *Aeterni Patris* (1879) that declared Aquinas the official philosopher of Catholicism resulted in a revived interest in his work and its applicability. From the years 1920–40 alone, 5,666 entries appeared in a Thomistic bibliography published as a supplement to volume XXI of *Modern Schoolman* (Bourke 1945). From the 1930s onward, Catholic philosophers and theologians attempted to rehabilitate Aquinas by turning to what has been called Transcendental Thomism, or to an Existentialist Thomism or, finally, to personalism. The latter position was espoused by Karol Wojtyła, Pope John-Paul II, himself the product of an education in continental philosophy and phenomenology. But even more traditional versions of Thomism continue to survive. In the 1960s, as the Church geared up to reconsider its position on artificial contraception, two Roman Catholic philosophers—Germain Grisez and Louis Dupré—each teaching in the philosophy department at Georgetown University, found themselves on opposite sides of the debate. Grisez (1964) used natural law to support the ban on artificial contraception by maintaining procreation as a primary purpose of sex. Dupré (1964) used

natural law to advocate for a change in the traditional position, arguing that it is our nature to use our reason to devise ways to control the physical world. Dupré might well have convinced the pontifical commission that recommended a change in the Church's position, but Paul VI decided to overturn that recommendation.

More recently, Gareth Moore, O.P. (2001 [1992]), a Dominican in the tradition of Aquinas, has addressed sexual ethics from the perspective of the primacy of the concept of love of neighbor. He argues to preserve most of the Catholic Christian teachings on sex, but from a different vantage point, from that of love. He provides a sophisticated account of motive and action, and he continues the Thomistic tradition of using natural reason as the basis from which to argue. He also calls our attention to the necessity for careful, scholarly work in biblical translation and contextualization. He exhorts us to attend to the social structure from which various prohibitions arise. For example, he revisits Leviticus' account of the prohibition against homosexuality between men and reminds the reader that no such prohibition of sex between women can be found there. "The understanding of this law that sees it as forbidding homosexual relations, just like that, is oversimple and misses the point . . . it forbids a man lying with a man *as with a woman*" (Moore 2001 [1992]: 39). It is forbidden because it reduces one man to the position of a woman, and that violates the social order of the ancient Israelites. His point is not that homosexuality is now acceptable when once it was not. It is, rather, that one needs to investigate the sources of prohibitions and determine the reason for them.

In the Protestant Christian tradition James B. Nelson (1992) of the United Church of Christ blames the body/spirit dualism of the earlier Christian tradition for the distortion of sex that one so often finds. He advocates a continuation of the sexual revolution of the 1960s to get rid of our root problems, "the continuing power of our inherited sexual dualisms—spirit believed to be essentially different from and superior to body—and its patriarchal counterpart, male believed to be essentially different from and superior to female" (Nelson 1992: 19). His solution is to engage in dialogue with others using scripture, tradition, experience, and reason to address and reevaluate issues such as sexual orientation, marriage, pornography, sexual abuse, and sexual violence. He is motivated by what he thinks is an urgent need to address "discrepancies between official Church teaching and the actual sexual practices of Church members" (Nelson 1992: 18).

One final strategy to commend to our readers' consideration is one undertaken by a host of scholars. It consists of a careful rereading and reconsideration of both scripture and tradition, beginning with the study of ancient languages and focusing on insights available from anthropologists, archaeologists, and historians to obtain accurate versions of ancient (and not so ancient) texts. Some of this work of pain-staking and meticulous scholarship is present in, for example, Garry Wills' recent translation of Augustine's *Confessions* (2006 [397]). More can be seen in Mark D. Jordan's *The Ethics of Sex* (2002) wherein he returns to the translation of Paul's term *porneia* (1 Thessalonians 4) and carefully considers that in other Greek texts, prior to a long tradition of emphasis on "lust" and "fornication," the word referred to "prostitution." Such vigilant scholarship can clarify historical interpretations and suggest alternative readings that might make more sense of the sex/theism relationship, and perhaps even address the genuine suffering of real people resulting from applications of hasty or uninformed interpretations.

Jordan's other suggestion is one that seems an appropriate note on which to end this chapter. He suggests that the Church should consider attending to sexual politics as much as to sexual ethics. He contends, in the spirit of Foucault, that we need to reconceptualize the Christian project as the search for sin

in the exercises of codifying power. These days the most dangerous sins don't seem to come from the pursuit of sexual pleasure, but from the pursuit of power . . . The parable (after Foucault) encourages us to conceive the possibility for rethinking Christian ethics apart from any of the old projects of Christendom or the current project of tacit accommodation to modern state power. If we were able to free Christian ethics somewhat from the visible and invisible needs of regulatory programs, we might conceive the glorious possibility of a Christian sexual ethics that would not be the ethics of any Christendom. After centuries in which Christian ethics has been enforced as a police power, we might rather be grateful for the innocence relative powerlessness affords our discourses. We could stop trying to strike a quiet deal with the successors of Christendom; we could enjoy our dispossession. We might even begin to think of Christian sexual ethics as the salvific teaching of God through the sexual lives of Christians.

(Jordan 2002: 137–8)

Related Topics

Chapter 3: The God of the Jews and the Jewish God; Chapter 4: Christianity; Chapter 23: Psychology; Chapter 25: Moral Inquiry

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IRONY

Matthew Dickerson

The world is full of seeming incongruity. Incongruities abound in the meanings of words, and in the meanings as well as the results of actions.

Human words, for example, are often best understood in some way other than their literal meaning. This can be the case either because of the intention of the speaker (or writer), or through the hearers' (or readers') broader understanding of context for those words. When we read of King David's response to the prophet Nathan in II Samuel 2:5–6, condemning the man who has stolen a sheep, we know something that David does not know: Nathan's parable was about David, and David is thus judging himself. Readers thus understand David's words more deeply than they are intended to be understood. We might say that David's expression of righteous wrath at the moment is incongruous with his own life. Similarly, when the high priest Caiaphas notes that it is better for one person to die than an entire people (John 18:12), he has the sacrifice of Jesus in mind. However, he almost certainly did not understand the meaning of that sacrifice in the same way that Jesus did when speaking of his own death (for example, in John 12:20–26). In the context of the whole Gospel story, readers might see the words of Caiaphas to have a much deeper meaning than the high priest could have intended.

Likewise, human actions do not always achieve their desired or intended ends, or have the same meaning for the actor as for the audience of that action. There is an incongruity, sometimes in the extreme, between what we intend or expect will result from our actions and what actually happens. We try to bring peace between two friends and we end up causing a worse fight. We move quickly to save a glass of milk from being spilled and we accidentally dump the entire pitcher. Our efforts to impress the object of our affections result instead in making us look foolish. We take a cure that proves worse than the disease it is meant to cure. There might be no greater example than that of Adam and Eve biting the fruit in the Garden of Eden. Though they might have gained something of the knowledge they sought when deceived by the serpent, what resulted from their actions was a bitter turnabout from what they must have desired.

The story of the Tower of Babel has a similar sort of ending as the tale of Adam and Eve. The very purpose of the great building project of Babel was an attempt to avoid being scattered over the face of the earth (Genesis 11). The result, as we know, was precisely that the people were scattered over the face of the earth (Genesis 11:9). This example thus becomes an incongruity of both words and actions, for it not only puts the results of the project at odds with the intention, but also provides a context for the words spoken by the people: "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth" (Genesis 11:4).

Indeed, incongruity of these types is so ubiquitous in life that we have a word to describe it: we call it *irony*.

Now the word *irony*, when used without a qualifier, has a breadth of meanings. Even dictionaries don't always agree on the definitions. For that reason, we can also qualify the term and speak specifically of several different types of ironies including *dramatic* irony, *cosmic* irony, *historic* irony, *verbal* irony, and *situational* irony. These all carry different meanings. At the core of all these ironies, however, is the notion of incongruity: words or actions or events are given a different, sometimes opposite, meaning because of the knowledge of the persons hearing the words, or through considering the events or their outcomes.

Sarcasm, for example—when one's actual or literal words carry the exact opposite connotation as the intended meaning—is not the same thing as irony, but it can certainly be one form of *verbal irony* in which the speaker understands and intends the incongruity. When our actions have the opposite result from that which was intended, we refer to it as *situational irony*. When, in literature, a character's understanding of a situation is incongruous with the reality of the situation as known by the reader, we call that *dramatic irony*. An attitude of cynicism, when broadly applied, sees all human actions as masking some hidden ulterior, and ignoble, motive; the ubiquitous incongruity between seemingly virtuous actions and the non-virtuous motives behind those actions makes all of life seem ironic.

Not surprisingly, there are many different ways of viewing these ironies of life. A person's view of the ultimate meaning of existence, or lack thereof, has a significant impact on how that person views ironies. *Cosmic irony*, for example—an idea rooted in polytheistic religions such as that of the ancient Greeks and Romans, or that of Norse—views the strange twists and turns of human lives and human history as the results of the arbitrary or perhaps capricious whims of the gods. The polytheist might view the gods as toying with mortals for their own ends; we are the butt of cosmic jokes, or perhaps the pawns in the petty battles between gods that have nothing to do with our own goals and plans. The ironies of human history thus have some sort of cosmic meaning, but the meaning is completely independent of human history (as perceived by humans), and thus from a human point of view the incongruities can at some level be viewed as random and meaningless. This sort of cosmic irony is at the heart of Kurt Vonnegut Jr's 1959 novel *The Sirens of Titan*.

A lens of naturalism might look at life's ironies and see them as having no transcendent meaning at all, since life itself is seen as having no transcendent meaning. In the aforementioned case of the spilled milk, for example, there is no deep or profound meaning, and we should not be looking for one (even as we should not be crying over the spill). Or, alternately, the naturalist might simply note that there is no such thing as situational irony at all: everything, including apparent human intention, is reducible to material causes which are never incongruous; all actions are governed by the material laws of the universe and so everything happens exactly as it must (or as the randomness behavior of quanta determine that it will).

A theistic worldview, by contrast, provides a very different framework or lens for understanding these various ironies. There might be transcendent meaning in these situational ironies, but that meaning is not to be found in the gods but, rather, in God. One might even say, as we shall see, that theism provides an *ironic understanding of irony* in which seeming irony is not ironic at all. Indeed, one of the central lessons of theistic religions is that human plans, when undertaken apart from the plans of God, rarely

achieve their desired ends—at least not in the desired way. Often, they achieve quite the opposite. The thing that we want is the very thing that our actions prevent us from having. From a human point of view, this is what might be called the negative side of irony.

Of course irony can also work the other way, for the fundamental theistic premise that God is at work in the universe also tells us that the very act of giving up the thing we desire—really and truly giving it up—might be the only path toward the fulfillment of that desire. If you seek to gain your life you might lose it, but if you give up your life, you gain it. The first shall be last, but the last shall also be first. Blessed are the poor for theirs is the kingdom. Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted. The meek, who do not set out to rule the earth, are the ones who will inherit it.

Since many of the central meanings of the word *irony* are literary meanings, and since theism itself comes to us through the literatures of various sacred texts, it is appropriate to begin an exploration of theism and irony with a look at one very important work of literature that is both deeply theistic and fully of irony.

Irony and Theism in the Literature of J. R. R. Tolkien

One of most popular and well-known literary works of the past century is also one that is profoundly theistic: J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. At first glance, Tolkien's work of heroic fantasy might not seem like an ironic work at all. As Tom Shippey has noted, heroes are central to Tolkien's work, and yet "Tolkien did not want to be ironic about heroes" (Shippey 2003: 71). This caused a difficulty for Tolkien because most modern readers have an ingrained cynicism (see Keyes 2006), and in particular are deeply cynical of heroes. Thus, Shippey points out, heroes in the ancient mold such as Tolkien wanted to present in characters like Aragorn or Faramir "are not acceptable anymore." Instead, heroes "tend very strongly to be treated with irony: the modern view of *Beowulf* is John Gardner's novel *Grendel*" (Shippey 2003: 71). The *Beowulf* example is carefully chosen because Tolkien was a *Beowulf* scholar, and this northern Germanic hero is precisely the type he was drawing from. We might add to Shippey's example the entirely cynical look at the hero *Beowulf* in Robert Zemeckis' 2007 film of the same name in which the hero (played by Ray Winstone), rather than defeating Grendel's mother (played by Angelina Jolie), is seduced by her and sires an even greater monstrous enemy: a dragon. This sort of irony is far from what Tolkien desired.

It is also worth mentioning again that sarcasm also can stand close to irony in that both are dependent on contrast and intent. Sarcasm is a contrast between literal and intended meaning of words. Though some of Tolkien's characters on rare occasion might speak in ways that border on sarcasm, Tolkien is not known as a sarcastic author.

Nonetheless, even as *The Lord of the Rings*, by the author's own admission is a deeply theistic and religious work (see Carpenter 1981: especially pages 172, 288), it is also deeply ironic, and the theism and irony are tightly related. Three ironic consequences in particular are worth exploring in the novel: the means of Saruman's defeat, the manner of Gollum's death, and the cause of Aragorn's victory.

One of the more explicit ironies of *The Lord of the Rings* regards the manner of Saruman's demise. The overthrow of the White Wizard Saruman actually contains multiple ironies, or multiple levels of irony. As readers remember, there are many contributing factors to his defeat and later to his death. The valiant defense of Aragorn and the men of Rohan certainly played a role in the defeat of Saruman's armies at the Battle of

Helm's Deep. There is not anything particularly ironic in this. There is some small irony that Saruman was eventually killed not by any of his enemies, but by his own mistreated servant Wormtongue. But the biggest cause of his downfall, and one highly ironic aspect of it, is the work of the tree-creatures known as Ents, who overthrow Isengard and help destroy Saruman's armies. For one thing Saruman had waged a war on trees. He did not care for living things. He was a man of metal.

Furthermore, the Ents were roused to defeat Saruman by the hobbits Merry and Pippin. This adds two more layers of irony. Not only did the wise Elrond *not* want these two hobbits to go on the quest, presumably thinking they were too weak or small to do anything significant, but they ended up in Fangorn Forest where they were able to rouse the Ents because Saruman himself ordered their capture; they were brought to Fangorn as prisoners by Saruman's orcs. In other words, Saruman's downfall at the hands (or limbs) of the Ents is initiated by the hobbits, and it was Saruman himself who was responsible for bringing the hobbits to the Ents. Lest we miss this irony, the author is kind enough to point it out for us not once, but twice, through the voice of the wizard Gandalf. Gandalf mentions it first to Legolas, Gimli, and Aragorn when he meets them in Fangorn as he tells them what he knows of the fate of the hobbits since their capture. And he says it again later even more explicitly, noting that Merry and Pippin would not have come to Isengard had it not been for Saruman who brought them at a marvelous speed and just in the nick of time for *his own destruction*. It is particularly interesting, as Gandalf notes, that Saruman is being treacherous to both the west and to Sauron. Thus we could also note the irony regarding Sauron's own downfall.

We might also notice the irony in the manner of Gollum's death. Though Tolkien does not explicitly bring this irony to our attention through the voice of Gandalf or the narrator, Gollum's death and the destruction of the Ring are perhaps the most obvious irony in all of *The Lord of the Rings*. Gollum, or Sméagol as he was once known, desires his *precious*, the One Ring, more than anything else. When he loses it to Bilbo, he will give anything, do anything, promise anything, and commit any treachery, to get it back. And until he does get it back, he is also intent on protecting the Ring from destruction. And yet not only does Gollum become the vehicle by which the Ring is destroyed, the Ring also brings about Gollum's death.

The least obvious, but perhaps greatest irony might be the victory of Aragorn. Aragorn is faced with three choices after the fall of Boromir. Two of those three choices—going to Minas Tirith to fight, or going to Mordor to help Sam—seem to have some strategic advantage in the war. Going to Minas Tirith could help win the most important military victory. And, of course, as far as Aragorn knows, Frodo has little hope of success without his help, and if Frodo fails all are doomed. The third choice, to chase after Merry and Pippin, is the least strategic. Indeed Aragorn thinks he is taking himself out of the battle and giving up all his hopes. Thus he chooses to give up pursuit of victory. And yet that very choice is what brings him victory. Once again, it is the wise Gandalf who points this out, telling Aragorn not to regret his decision, and noting that if Aragorn had made the seemingly more strategic choice of going to Minas Tirith to help in the military battle, the two of them would never have met on time.

The Theism of Tolkien's Ironies

What ties together these various ironies in Tolkien's writing? What gives them meaning? A strong hint is found in the final paragraphs of his book *The Hobbit*—which, like

its longer sequel *The Lord of the Rings*, is also full of irony. Near the end of *The Hobbit*, some time after the death of the dragon and after a great battle, the hero Bilbo Baggins receives a visit from Gandalf and one of the dwarves who had been with him on the quest. When Bilbo learns that certain prophecies had come true with the return of the dwarves to the Lonely Mountain, he is surprised. After all, he had a hand in bringing about these events, including the death of the dragon. Indeed, it is these choices and not any supernatural strength or abilities, which define him as a hero. This is true not only of Bilbo in *The Hobbit*, but of all Tolkien's heroes: Aragorn, Faramir, Beren, Luthien, Gandalf, Legolas, Merry, Pippin, Sam, and so on. How could Bilbo then believe in some prophecy if the outcome of the events depends on the choices of beings with free will?

What Gandalf points out is that, although Bilbo all along made free choices, and moreover his choices impacted the final outcome, nonetheless the events (including many apparently lucky escapes) were also *managed* with some greater purpose in mind. Of course to say that events were managed (Gandalf uses the passive voice here) is to imply that there is a Manager. What characters see as *luck*, Gandalf is thus saying, would more accurately be described as miracle.

This is one of the hints at the underlying theism in Tolkien's Middle-earth that is given greater voice in *The Lord of the Rings* and is most fully explained in *The Silmarillion*. The outcome of events, however ironic or incongruous they might appear to the characters within the story, are part of a cosmic story. It is not a story about the arbitrary whims of gods, but about the carrying and sustaining work of God.

Another way of saying this is that what appear to the characters in the story as situational ironies, and what at first appear to the readers as literary irony, at another level are not ironic at all. What happened is exactly what ought to have happened. As Tom Shippey has noted:

But in the end there is a pattern that is both just and fair, and I would add, is Providential. And that, I would say, is the "ideological core" of *The Lord of the Rings*. It tells you how providence works, and it works of course through people, lots of them with different capacities and different intentions. The intentions, good and bad, are woven together by some superior Power. This Power does not affect free will, indeed it demands free will, but it allows free-will actions to weave together, in ways that not even the wisest can foresee. It is the height of wisdom, then, to know the limits of wisdom.

(Shippey 2007: 317)

Situational Irony and the Bible

It is this notion of some "superior Power," as Shippey puts it, which brings us back to the theistic context for understanding irony. It is precisely *because* there is a God who works within his creation that ironies abound: not only situational ironies, but ironies of speech such as the words of the high priest Caiaphas or of King David cited earlier. And the meaning of these ironies—which in other circumstances might simply be tragically comic or happily comic—makes sense and is understood in the context of theism.

Joseph has a pair of dreams, the meaning of which seems quite clear: one day his brothers and even his parents will bow down to him. This is the sort of dream it would have been far more prudent for Joseph *not* to share with his brothers. Their response,

upon being told of such a dream by their uppity young brother, cannot be expected to be very positive. Apparently lacking either common sense or humility, however, Joseph shares the dream anyway. The brothers, already jealous of Joseph for the special treatment he receives from their father, throw him in a well, nearly kill him, and then sell him off into slavery. Irony number one: Joseph's sharing of a dream in which he *gains* power over his brothers turns out to be an important catalyst in Joseph *losing* all his power, and entering into slavery and a significant period of hardship and suffering. It is safe to assume that for Joseph this was not the desired outcome.

But the ironies are layered. For by the brothers selling Joseph into slavery in order to get rid of him and prove his dreams false, they put him in the very circumstances by which those dreams will come true. After a long period of hardship, Joseph ends up as one of the powerful men in the world, second only to the Pharaoh. Many years later, his brothers do bow down before him, though they don't at first recognize him. Again, their efforts to remove him from power—and from power over them—are ultimately what place him in a position of great power. The irony had two sides.

Now we may wonder what might have happened if Joseph had just kept his mouth shut. Or what if the brothers had held their peace and not reacted in jealousy? We don't know. Presumably, God would still have fulfilled the dream, though in a different way. Or maybe God's foreknowledge renders irrelevant the entire question of what might have happened. In fact, we are not told *why* God acted in this way. We may observe, as the story unfolds, that He fulfills the prophecy that had been given to Joseph through a dream. He also rescues the people of Israel from famine, through Joseph's position in Egypt. However, we might wonder why He gave the dream to Joseph in the first place, even as we conjecture that He certainly could have saved Jacob's family from the famine without them going to Egypt—or simply prevented the famine in the first place. It is possible that God allows the dream to be fulfilled in the way it is in order to teach something to Joseph. It is also possible, and in keeping with the biblical understanding of God's character, that God was using all of the pride and spite and dysfunctionality of Jacob's family in order to make God's name known in the land of Egypt, where otherwise the Jews might never have gone. We don't know. Nonetheless, in a theistic context, we can look back on the story and see the hand of God at work throughout, and believe that all of the ironies are neither meaningless nor capricious.

The story of Moses and the Exodus of the Israelites is also full of ironies. It is unlikely, when Moses struck down an Egyptian in order to save a Hebrew slave who was being beaten, that he expected the Hebrews to be the ones who grumbled and complained. Yet, ironically, this is what happened. The consequence, certainly far different from what Moses intended, was that he had to flee from Egypt.

If one does not see irony in the way that God provided manna for the Israelites in the desert (Exodus 16), there is at least irony in the consequences of one of the Israelites attempting to take too much or too little of it (turns out they had exactly as much as they needed no matter how much they took), or in trying to store it overnight (it grew smelly and full of maggots)—or in not taking enough for the Sabbath (no more appeared, and they went hungry for the day).

And all of this comes to us today in the form of stories: the scriptures passed down in and through theistic religions. What might have been situational irony when the events themselves unfolded becomes for us today a sort of *dramatic* irony in the literature of the Bible. And when the characters within the story speak of these things we have *verbal* ironies. Numerous times throughout scripture, we the readers know something that

the characters within the stories don't know when they speak, or can't predict or don't understand when they act.

The story of Job could be one of the greatest examples of dramatic irony in all of literature—and at one level, one of the times that the biblical story might come closest to cosmic irony. The story of Job begins with the scene in Heaven, when Satan the accuser comes before God. All of the terrible tragedies that Job endures result from this meeting in Heaven. We, the audience of the tale, are privy to this information from the start. Job, however, is not. It is not clear that Job is ever told why he suffers what he suffers; if the whole scenario is ever explained to him, the book of Job doesn't tell us so. We can only guess how he might respond if it were revealed to him.

And his friends, for all their wisdom, don't know either. So as we sit and listen to the words of these three comforters, all along we know something that they don't know. And, as a result, we know also that, even if there is some truth or wisdom in their words, at the deepest level they are wrong; they don't know what happened or why it happened. There is, therefore, an ironic justice in addition to the dramatic and verbal ironies, for the three comforters are themselves afflicted at the end of the tale, and Job must intercede for them to God.

There is a similar sort of irony throughout the stories of Saul and David in the Book of Samuel. The author (or authors) of Samuel often provide information to the reader that one or more of the central characters in the story do not have. We know when Samuel has anointed David king, behind Saul's back. We know where David is hiding when Saul is looking for him. Most important, perhaps, is that, even the very first time we read the story, we *know* that Saul will not succeed in killing David.

And this leads us back to a question raised near the start of this chapter. From a theistic point of view, one might argue that situational irony doesn't exist at all—at least not from an ultimate perspective. If God is at work in the world he created, and is accomplishing his purposes, then everything will end up exactly as it ought to end up. Put another way, what might be ironic from a human perspective is not ironic from a divine perspective. Ironies are not really ironic. And that might be the greatest irony of all.

Related Topics

Chapter 14: Naturalism; Chapter 15: Humanities; Chapter 18: Physical Cosmology; Chapter 44: Literature; Chapter 47: Narrative; Chapter 51: Happiness; Chapter 54: The Meaning of Life

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Recommended Reading

- Dickerson, M. and D. O'Hara (2006) *From Homer to Harry Potter: A Handbook of Myth and Fantasy*, Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press. Explores meaning in mythic and fantastic literature, including examples of theism and irony.
- Evans, C. S. (1987) "Kierkegaard's View of Humor: Must Christians Always Be Solemn?," *Faith and Philosophy* 4: 176–86. Good treatment of humor from a Christian perspective.
- Keyes, D. (2006) *Seeing Through Cynicism: A Reconsideration of the Power of Suspicion*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. Explores both the pervasiveness of cynicism in contemporary culture and the detrimental impact of cynicism on our lives, and ultimately shows how to be cynical about cynicism itself.
- Roberts, R. (1987) "Smiling With God: Reflections on Christianity and the Psychology of Humor," *Faith and Philosophy* 4: 168–75. Good treatment of humor from a Christian perspective.

THE MEANING OF LIFE

Stewart Goetz

Defining “Theism” and “The Meaning of Life”

“Theism” is roughly the view that there exists a God who is all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing. Moreover, according to theism, God has created this universe and, most importantly for the topic of this chapter, human beings, for a purpose. In terms of theism, the question “What is the meaning of life?” is the question “For what purpose did God create human beings *as individuals*?” Thus, the question “What is the meaning of life?” is the first-person question “For what purpose did God create me?”

To answer this question, persons in different theistic traditions (such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) might appeal to their sacred texts/scriptures. This approach assumes that the texts were written to answer this question, which is, perhaps, an unwarranted assumption. However, even if this assumption is granted, it seems as if the answer provided by the relevant texts must pass the scrutiny of reason. After all, were a text to state that the purpose for which God creates an individual is that he or she serve as food for beings on another planet, it would be summarily dismissed as unreasonable. “So much the worse for the text,” one would conclude. Hence, in what follows, the assumption is that if there is a purpose for which God created each of us as individuals, this purpose can be known by means of reason alone, without appeal to religious scriptures.

What, then, is the purpose for which a person is created? The Christian philosopher and theologian St Augustine wrote: “For who wishes anything for any other reason than that he may become happy? . . . It is the decided opinion of all who use their brains that all men desire to be happy” (Augustine 1993: IV.23; X.1). With Augustine’s comments as our lead, one can plausibly affirm that God created an individual for the purpose that he or she be happy. However, as Augustine also pointed out elsewhere (Augustine 1993: XIX.4), the kind of happiness for which a person yearns, which is a happiness that is without pain and suffering, is not available on this earth. The conclusion, then, is that this “perfect” happiness must be available in the afterlife.

These are the bare bones of a theistic interpretation of, and answer to, the question “What is the meaning of life?” But these bare bones are solid enough to have elicited a veritable host of criticisms. By considering some of them, one can acquire a deeper understanding of the theistic position I have outlined, which for simplicity of presentation, I will henceforth refer to as “the” theistic position.

Criticisms of the Theistic View of Life’s Meaning

First, Kurt Baier and others have argued that to attribute a purpose to a human being is less than complimentary. Indeed, it is degrading:

If, at a garden party, I ask a man in livery, “What is your purpose?” I am insulting him. I might as well have asked, “What are you *for*?” Such questions reduce him to the level of a gadget, a domestic animal, or perhaps a slave. I imply that *we* allot to *him* the tasks, the goals, the aims which he is to pursue; that *his* wishes and desires and aspirations and purposes are to count for little or nothing.

(Baier 2000: 120; cf. Baggini 2004: 16–17)

Surely, however, Baier is overreaching here. While it is possible that a person’s being an artifact and, thereby, having a purpose is degrading, it need not be. It all depends upon what that purpose is. What if the purpose is that that person be perfectly happy? Is that offensive and degrading for that individual? It is hard to see how it is because it seems to be in the person’s overall or long-term best interest. Does it entail that the individual’s wishes, desires, aspirations and purposes count for nothing? Again, it is hard to see how that is the case, if one’s wish and desire for perfect happiness can be satisfied.

Moreover, being created for perfect happiness hardly makes wishing for, desiring, and aspiring to that happiness, in Baier’s words, “count for little or nothing.” Perhaps Baier believes that being created affects these attitudes in this way because the individual does not have any choice about what he or she ultimately wishes for, desires, and aspires to. A person is simply stuck with desiring perfect happiness and has no ultimate say about the matter. But why would having such control be important or good? What would having such control make possible? Would a person be free to choose to make perfect unhappiness the ultimate object of his or her desire and the purpose for which he or she acts? Surely one has passed over into talking complete nonsense at this point. After all, if anything is intrinsically good (that is, good without deriving its goodness from anything else), perfect happiness seems to fit the bill. And if anything is intrinsically bad, perfect unhappiness is it. Moreover, the idea that a person might choose and pursue that which is intrinsically bad for its own sake is incoherent because it is a conceptual truth that desire ultimately aims at experiencing what is intrinsically good (this is why Augustine’s claims are so eminently reasonable) and avoiding what is intrinsically evil.

A second and more direct attack on the theistic view of life’s meaning simply denies that perfect happiness is the meaning of life. Owen Flanagan provides an instance of this form of argument:

Some philosophers distinguish between things that have some property—for example, value—intrinsically and things that have the property derivatively. Money is worthless until we make it worth something. Happiness is said to have worth in and of itself. Suppose this is true. Would it follow that a life with many happy times in it was worth living? Not necessarily. Properties of parts do not confer the property on the whole. My parts are small, I am large. Happy times, even many of them, might not constitute a worthwhile life. But I am skeptical in any case that a life’s meaning could be intrinsic—could come from just being alive or from something that has value, no matter what. Life’s meaning must derive from things other than just being alive. Happiness is probably one of the things that confers worth, but it is not enough. After all, one might perversely find happiness in evil things. Perhaps happiness is not necessary even. One might live a life largely devoid of happiness but still live a good and worthwhile life—even as seen from the subjective point of view.

(Flanagan 2000: 199)

Flanagan is right: life's meaning must come from something other than simply being alive. While being alive is a necessary condition of life's having meaning, it is not sufficient. On the theistic view, the something other that is the source of life's meaning is perfect happiness, where perfect happiness is intrinsically good. Flanagan recognizes that some believe that happiness has intrinsic value, namely, the value of being intrinsically good. If we think of a life as something that can have many happy times and, thereby, many instances of intrinsic value, Flanagan asserts that a life of nothing but happy times might not be intrinsically good. According to Flanagan, this is because a property (intrinsic goodness) of each of the parts (happy times) is not conferred on the whole that is made up of nothing but those parts. His example of a case where the whole does not possess a property shared by each of its parts is his physical body. Each of the parts is small but the body of which they are parts is big. And Flanagan is surely correct about this. However, the theist need not presuppose the truth of the principle that always and everywhere a property of each of the parts of a whole is also a property of the whole. What does seem plausible is the claim that, while *in certain instances* a property of each of the parts is not also a property of the whole, in other instances it is. Whether or not a property of each part is a property of the whole depends upon the property in question. For example, consider a crosswalk made up of nothing but red bricks. Each of the bricks is red. Is it reasonable to conclude that the crosswalk as a whole is red? Yes. Similarly, it seems eminently reasonable to conclude that a life that is made up of nothing but instances of happiness that are intrinsically good is, as a whole, a life of perfect happiness that is both intrinsically good and, therefore, good for its subject.

What, then, is one to say about Flanagan's claim that a life largely devoid of happiness could still be a good and worthwhile life? Understood in one way, Flanagan's claim seems eminently reasonable. Understood in another way, it seems obviously false. What is the eminently reasonable understanding? Well, it could be that someone like Mother Teresa's life was good and worthwhile in the sense that her work brought bodily and spiritual goods *to others*. But was her life good and worthwhile *for her* (what Flanagan calls the "subjective point of view")? This is a different matter. From what we now know, the answer would appear to be that it was not. Mother Teresa describes in her private correspondence how she lived for decades with darkness and pain in her soul and repeatedly pleaded with God to bring light (happiness) into that darkness:

Your Grace, . . . please pray specially for me that I may not spoil His work and that our Lord may show Himself—for there is such terrible darkness within me, as if everything was [sic] dead. It has been like this more or less from the time I started "the work." . . . Pray for me—for within me everything is icy cold.—It is only that blind faith that carries me through for in reality to me all is darkness. As long as Our Lord has all the pleasure—I really do not count . . . I understand a little the tortures of hell—without God. I have no words to express what I want to say, and yet . . . knowingly and willingly I offered . . . to pass even eternity in this terrible suffering, if this would give Him now a little more pleasure.

(Mother Teresa 2007: 149, 163, 172)

Beyond trying to understand what Mother Teresa went through, which was obviously not good for her, it seems clear that at no point did she seek for its own sake the darkness that at times almost overwhelmed her. As the editor of her writings, Brian Kolodiejchuk, rightly points out, "Mother Teresa did not enjoy suffering for the sake of suffering"

(Mother Teresa 2007: 175). No one could do that because suffering is intrinsically bad and we all avoid it for its own sake. But while suffering is intrinsically bad and never sought for its own sake, it can, as Mother Teresa understood, be instrumentally good if it leads to the experience of happiness, whether one's own or that of someone else. For herself, then, Mother Teresa's life was much less than fully meaningful. Only her own experience of happiness could have rectified her situation. In the theistic view, in order for her life to end up ultimately meaningful, she will have to experience in the afterlife the perfect happiness for which she longed but never had in this life.

Finally, Flanagan makes the important point that one might perversely find happiness in evil things. Presumably, what he has in mind here is that some people obtain happiness through perversely wicked actions. And surely this is the case. However, "bad happiness" is simply happiness that is produced by bad actions. Strictly speaking, it is the actions that are bad, not the happiness. So the happiness that is derived from bad actions is good, even though its sources are bad.

For a third criticism of the theistic view of life's meaning, let us turn once again to Baier. As Mother Teresa and St Augustine were all too aware, there is much pain and suffering in this world. Given that there is, Baier says that a problem for life's meaning "is to find a purpose grand and noble enough to explain and justify the great amount of undeserved suffering in this world" (Baier 2000: 122). Now, if the experience of perfect happiness is the greatest possible good for an individual, then it would seem that if any good is good enough to justify the great amount of undeserved suffering that a person experiences, it is this good. What is interesting to note at this juncture is that Baier insists that the idea of perfect happiness is actually *too high* a standard to be used for evaluating the quality of an individual's life in this world:

The Christian evaluation of earthly lives is misguided because it adopts a quite unjustifiably high standard. Christianity singles out the major shortcomings of our earthly existence: there is not enough happiness; there is too much suffering; the good and bad points are quite unequally and unfairly distributed; the underprivileged and under-endowed do not get adequate compensation; it lasts only a short time. It then quite accurately depicts the perfect or ideal life as that which does not have any of these shortcomings. Its next step is to promise the believer that he will be able to enjoy this perfect life later on. And then he adopts as its standard of judgment the perfect life, dismissing as inadequate anything that falls short of it. . . .

This procedure is as illegitimate as if I were to refuse to call anything tall unless it is infinitely tall, or anything beautiful unless it is perfectly flawless, or anyone strong unless he is omnipotent. Even if it were true that there is available to us an after-life which is flawless and perfect, it would still not be legitimate to judge earthly lives by this standard.

(Baier 2000: 127)

In response to Baier, it is important to point out that in "adopting" the experience of perfect happiness as the purpose of life, the theist is not making a choice of any kind, let alone an arbitrary choice (one made for no purpose or reason whatsoever). Rather, he or she is simply recognizing perfect happiness for what it is, namely, a great intrinsic good. The goodness of perfect happiness is not a matter of what anyone commands, says, or chooses.

As to whether perfect happiness is a legitimate standard for judging the goodness of this life, it seems that Baier is trying to have it both ways. On the one hand, he seems to assume this standard himself when he raises the problem of evil and claims that there is no purpose that is good enough to justify God's permitting the amount of undeserved suffering (evil) that is present in this world. Presumably Baier believes that had our earthly existence been thoroughly pleasurable and free of pain and suffering (perfectly happy), then there would not have been a problem of evil. That quality of existence would have been good enough to preclude any such problem. On the other hand, when someone else makes use of this standard to judge the quality of our earthly lives in light of the purpose for which we were created, Baier asserts that that person is guilty of setting the bar too high. If Baier's position is coherent, then it seems to follow that no one other than he (or someone who shares his view) is permitted to use the standard of perfect happiness either to assess or to justify the human condition. One can only wonder why he merits this privilege.

In light of Baier's argument, the following summary of the facts about the theistic understanding of perfect happiness is apropos: No one makes a choice about whether or not perfect happiness is good. It just is good because it is intrinsically so. Moreover, it is the experience of the goodness of happiness in this life, imperfect as it might be, which makes us yearn for that happiness which is perfect. And the happiness that is perfect is certainly not too high of a standard in light of which to assess what meaningfulness, if any, might be found in this or any other life.

According to Baier, though the theist's appeal to perfect happiness as the purpose of life sets the bar too high, an appeal to some purpose is necessary in order to justify all of the undeserved pain and suffering that occurs in this world. A fourth objection, then, to the theistic view of life's meaning arises out of the problem of evil. In terms of what good does God justify the allowance of so much evil in the lives of those whose purpose for existing is the experience of perfect happiness? In the estimation of William Rowe,

[I]t is reasonable to believe that the goods for the sake of which [God] permits much intense human suffering are goods that either are or include good experiences of the humans that endure the suffering. I say this because we normally would not regard someone as morally justified in permitting intense, involuntary suffering on the part of another, if that other were not to figure significantly in the good for which that suffering was necessary. We have reason to believe, then, that the goods for the sake of which much human suffering is permitted will include conscious experiences of these humans, conscious experiences that are themselves good . . . So if such goods do occur we are likely to know them.
(Rowe 1986: 244)

Rowe's position seems eminently reasonable. Moreover, given that perfect happiness is a person's greatest possible good, it seems as if the theist's understanding of the purpose of life provides the resources for explaining why there is evil. Perfect happiness is both something that is experienced by the humans who endure the suffering and it is a good of which we presently have knowledge. The problem as Rowe sees it is that we lack knowledge of any reason to think that God would not grant perfect happiness now, if it truly is the purpose for which each of us is created: "In the absence of any reason to think that [God] would need to postpone these good experiences, we have reason to expect that many of these goods would occur in the world we know" (Rowe 1986: 245).

Stated slightly differently, if perfect happiness is life's purpose, then why didn't God simply create us perfectly happy and have it over with? Why does evil exist, given what our purpose for existing is?

The problem of evil is much too large a topic to treat with any justice in a chapter like this. Nevertheless, some brief comments are warranted. Most importantly, it does not follow from the fact that perfect happiness is the purpose for which God created a person that this purpose is the justification for God's allowing that individual to undergo pain and suffering. What, then, might that justification be? Something along the following lines seems reasonable. If perfect happiness is the great good that it seems to be, then it is plausible to hold that not just anyone should experience it, regardless of how he or she has chosen to live his or her life. Some deserve perfect happiness while others do not. W. D. Ross expresses this point about desert in the following way:

If we compare two imaginary states of the universe, alike in the total amounts of virtue and vice and of pleasure and pain present in the two, but in one of which the virtuous were all happy and the vicious miserable, while in the other the virtuous were miserable and the vicious happy, very few people would hesitate to say that the first was a much better state of the universe than the second. It would seem then that . . . we must recognize as a[n] . . . independent good, the apportionment of pleasure and pain to the virtuous and the vicious respectively.

(Ross 1930: 138; cf. Lemos 1994: 40–5)

If we think of the apportionment of happiness to the virtuous and the denial of it to the vicious as an instantiation of the intrinsic good of justice, then we can go on to ask what, if anything, is a necessary condition of the obtaining of this justice? One necessary condition is the opportunity to exercise the capacity to make an undetermined free choice (or choices) of a kind that would merit the rewarding of the perfect happiness for which a person was created. The failure to make this choice would merit the denial of this perfect happiness. If something like this is the case, then what justifies God's allowance of evil is not the purpose for which a person was created but the possibility of that individual justly deserving the fulfillment of that purpose. If this is God's justification for allowing evil, then there is an answer to Rowe's query for a reason that would justify postponing the experience of perfect happiness. That reason is rooted in the need for the fulfillment of justice.

The theistic answer to the question "What is the meaning of life?" invokes the notion of perfect happiness. Up to this point, little, if anything, has been said about the nature of perfect happiness. However, some have wondered about the very intelligibility of the concept. As a sixth objection to the theistic position, consider the following comments of Julian Baggini:

So if life is to be meaningful, the "why/because" series [the series of purposeful explanations] cannot extend indefinitely into the future. At some point we have to reach an end point where a further "why" question is unnecessary, misguided or nonsensical. Otherwise the purpose of life is forever beyond our reach. . . .

But this gives rise to a further problem . . . When people fulfill a lifetime's ambition they often jokingly say, "I can die happy." But this invites the

serious reply, “Why not?” After all, if life is about the achievement of a goal, then once that goal is reached, what is there left to do? Once life’s purpose has been fulfilled, it no longer guides our actions, apparently leaving us with nothing to live for. . . .

This illustrates how if the meaning of life is tied to goal-achievement, then achieving that goal can leave you with “emptiness”—nothing left to provide meaning . . . Moments in time cannot be kept hold of, yet achievements are of their essence tied to moments of success, which all too quickly drift into the past.

(Baggini 2004: 28–9)

The theist proposes that perfect happiness is the meaning of life. As the meaning of life, its achievement is the final purpose beyond which there is none other. Baggini’s argument entails that if the theist is right, then the achievement of this purpose must leave us empty, because there is no further purpose toward which to act. If Baggini is right, the achievement of perfect happiness, far from being the meaning of life, guarantees that life ultimately ends up meaningless.

The first thing to notice about Baggini’s objection is the implicit assumption that the lack of anything further to *do* is problematic for life’s meaning. But such an assumption is open to question. Maybe life’s final purpose is not itself an action or acting and can be indefinitely experienced subsequent to a final act without the need for any further acting. In this context, it is helpful to consider briefly Robert Nozick’s idea of an experience machine (Nozick 1974: 42–5). Nozick asks his readers to imagine a machine, the programming of which will provide them with uninterrupted pleasure for as long as they wish (which readers, upon reflection, come to realize is for eternity) if they connect to it. As Nozick points out, a person who is connected to the experience machine does not have to *do* anything. An individual never has to *act*; he or she simply experiences pleasure. What Nozick wants to know is whether a reasonable person should accept an offer to be connected to the experience machine.

Readers typically wrestle with the idea of accepting the offer. On the one hand, they understandably find the thought of experiencing nothing but pleasure extremely attractive because it seems to guarantee that they are happy. On the other hand, the severance of pleasure from action puzzles them because the connection between pleasure and action is so pervasive in their own lives. We have to do something in order to experience pleasure. But as Nozick realizes, there is no necessary conceptual link between pleasure and action. One could have either without the other. Given that this is the case, a first answer to Baggini’s objection is that achievement of a final purpose like perfect happiness might result from an action and subsequently be sustained without the need for any further action. If perfect happiness is the experience of nothing except pleasure, as the example of the experience machine suggests, then achievement of this final purpose would not result in emptiness because one would be continuously infused with experiences of nothing but pleasure.

Baggini does discuss the experience machine. He claims not only that most people would reject the option of connecting to it, but also that they would be horrified at the idea of becoming attached to it: “The problem is that they feel they wouldn’t be living a ‘real’ life in the machine. It is not enough to have experiences of a good life, one really wants to live a good life” (Baggini 2004: 99). Baggini goes on to assert that the example of the experience machine makes clear that we value something above happiness,

which he calls “authenticity,” where authenticity involves achieving things through our own efforts and, thereby, being the authors of our own lives.

One might reasonably contest Baggini’s claim about authenticity, but for the sake of discussion let us assume that perfect happiness as the final end is not a thorough-going passive state of affairs. Is it possible to hold that perfect happiness involves action and satisfactorily answer Baggini’s objection? Surely it is possible. After all, why could it not be the case that once one has achieved the final purpose of perfect happiness by acting that one continues to preserve that happiness by means of on-going future actions? If there is nothing incoherent in such a suggestion (and there seems not to be), then it is not inevitable that emptiness follow upon the achievement of a final purpose. The fact that emptiness does sometimes follow upon achievement of a purpose in this world is no more than a contingent feature of this world. And the theist claims that it is in part this feature of this world that makes us long for a different world where this contingent feature no longer obtains.

A seventh, and final, objection to the theistic view of life’s meaning is broader in scope than any of the preceding and concerns the possibility of purposeful explanation itself. According to this objection, the emergence and success of modern science has made belief in the reality of purposeful explanation problematic. As Walter Stace points out, however, one must not make the mistake of thinking that it is one or more particular scientific theories or discoveries (for example, the Darwinian theory of evolution or geological finds that suggest the earth is extremely old) that have proven to be the death knell for purposeful explanations. The view that God has created us for a purpose is compatible with just about any particular theory or discovery. What is problematic, says Stace, is the assumption by scientists of all stripes

that inquiry into purposes is useless for what science aims at: namely, the prediction and control of events . . . Hence science from the seventeenth century onwards became exclusively an inquiry into causes. The conception of purpose in the world was ignored and frowned on. This, though silent and almost unnoticed, was the greatest revolution in human history . . . It is this which has killed religion . . . Religion can get on with any sort of astronomy, geology, biology, physics. But it cannot get on with a purposeless and meaningless universe. If the scheme of things is purposeless and meaningless, then the life of man is purposeless and meaningless.

(Stace 2000: 86–7)

Stace says that it is because inquiry into purposes is useless that science has killed religion. However, not only do proponents of the argument from science against the theistic view of life’s meaning believe that inquiry into purposes is useless, they also claim that it is methodologically forbidden by what is known as the principle of the causal closure of the physical world. Proponents of this view are routinely known as “naturalists,” and the following quotes from Jaegwon Kim, Douglas Futuyma, and Matthew Bagger are examples of how the argument from causal closure leads us to conclude that there is no room for any use of purposeful explanation in accounting for what exists and goes on in the physical world:

You want [or choose] to raise your arm, and your arm goes up. Presumably, nerve impulses reaching appropriate muscles in your arm made those muscles

contract, and that's how the arm went up. And these nerve signals presumably originated in the activation of certain neurons in your brain. What caused those neurons to fire? We now have a quite detailed understanding of the process that leads to the firing of a neuron, in terms of complex electrochemical processes involving ions in the fluid inside and outside a neuron, differences in voltage across cell membranes, and so forth. All in all we seem to have a pretty good picture of the processes at this microlevel on the basis of the known laws of physics, chemistry, and biology. If the immaterial mind is going to cause a neuron to emit a signal (or prevent it from doing so), it must somehow intervene in these electrochemical processes. But how could that happen? At the very interface between the mental and the physical where direct and unmediated mind-body interaction takes place, the nonphysical mind must somehow influence the state of some molecules, perhaps by electrically charging them or nudging them this way or that way. Is this really conceivable? Surely the working neuroscientist does not believe that to have a complete understanding of these complex processes she needs to include in her account the workings of immaterial souls and how they influence the molecular processes involved . . . Even if the idea of a soul's influencing the motion of a molecule . . . were coherent, the postulation of such a causal agent would seem neither necessary nor helpful in understanding why and how our limbs move . . . Most physicalists . . . accept the causal closure of the physical not only as a fundamental metaphysical doctrine but as an indispensable methodological presupposition of the physical sciences . . . If the causal closure of the physical domain is to be respected, it seems *prima facie* that mental causation must be ruled out.

(Kim 1996: 131–2, 147–8)

Science is the exercise of reason, and so is limited to questions that can be approached by the use of reason, questions that can be answered by the discovery of objective knowledge and the elucidation of natural laws of causation. In dealing with questions about the natural world, scientists must act as if they can be answered without recourse to supernatural powers . . . of God.

(Futuyma 1982: 169–70)

[W]e can never assert that, in principle, an event resists naturalistic [physical] explanation. A perfectly substantial, anomalous event, rather than providing evidence for the supernatural, merely calls into question our understanding of particular laws. In the modern era, this position fairly accurately represents the educated response to novelty. Rather than invoke the supernatural, we can always adjust our knowledge of the natural in extreme cases. In the modern age in actual inquiry, we never reach the point where we throw up our hands and appeal to divine intervention to explain a localized event like an extraordinary experience.

(Bagger 1999: 13)

As is the case with the problem of evil, there simply is not space herein to deal adequately with the argument from causal closure (see Goetz and Taliaferro 2008). Nevertheless, a couple of points are warranted.

First, a reader should be aware that if the causal closure argument is successful in excluding all invocations of purposeful explanation that involve God's activity, then it is also successful in excluding all invocations of purposeful explanation that involve our own actions as souls (for purposes of dealing with the argument from causal closure, it is to be assumed that souls exist whose mental actions, which are explained in terms of purposes, cause the occurrence of bodily events). What this means is not only that it cannot be the case that God creates human persons for a purpose but also that it cannot be the case that those human persons act for purposes, where those purposes lead to changes in the physical world. Thus, not only is it the case that the movements of my fingers while I am typing this chapter cannot be explained by a purpose that I have for writing it, but also any motions of your, the reader's, physical body cannot be explained by a purpose that you have to act. This is indeed an incredible implication of the argument from causal closure.

Second, given this incredible implication of the causal closure argument, what might be said in response to it? Consider Kim's example of the working neuroscientist and let us distinguish between a neuroscientist as an *ordinary human being* and a neuroscientist as a *physical scientist*. Surely a neuroscientist as an ordinary human being who is trying to understand the how and why of my bodily movements when I am typing this essay would refer to me and my reasons (purposes) for acting in a complete account of why my limbs move. Likewise, when, as an everyday person, she is considering her own work as a neuroscientist, she will view it as purposeful in nature. Must she, however, as a physical scientist, avoid making a reference to purposeful explanations?

The mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead points out that "[s]cientists animated by the purpose of proving that they are purposeless constitute an interesting subject for study" (Whitehead 1962: 16). Perhaps, however, a scientist need not be out to prove that there are no purposeful explanations at all in order to be justified in excluding such explanations in her scientific work. Kim tells us that the neuroscientist must avoid invoking a purposeful explanation in her work because as a physical scientist she must make a methodological assumption about the causal closure of the physical world. Is Kim right about this and, if he is, is such a commitment compatible with a commitment on the part of a physical scientist as an ordinary human being to causal openness? Or must a neuroscientist, who as a physical scientist assumes causal closure, also assume, if she is consistent, that as an ordinary human being her mention of choices and their purposeful explanations is no more than an explanatory heuristic device that is necessary because of an epistemic gap in her knowledge concerning the physical causes of human behavior?

In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to consider what it is about physical entities that a physical scientist such as a neuroscientist is often trying to discover in her experimental work. What is the purpose of a neuroscientist's inquiry? In the case of Kim's neuroscientist, what she is trying to discover as a physical scientist are the capacities of particles or micro-physical entities such as neurons to be causally affected by exercised causal powers of other physical entities, including other neurons. For example, in his pioneering work on the brain Wilder Penfield produced movements in the limbs of his patients by stimulating their cortical motor areas with an electrode (Penfield 1975). During his observation of the neural impulses that resulted from stimulation by the electrode, Penfield had to assume that the areas of the brains of the patients on whom he was doing his scientific work were causally closed to other causal influences. Without this methodological assumption, he could not conclude both that it was the

electrode (as opposed, say, to something “behind the scene” such as an empirically undetectable human soul, either that of the patient or someone else, or God) that causally affected the capacities of the neurons to conduct electrical impulses, and that it was the causal impulses of those neurons that causally affected the same capacities of other neurons further down the causal chains to produce the movements of the limbs. So, Penfield’s investigation of the brain required the methodological assumption of causal closure of the areas of the brain he was studying during his experiments. However, there is no reason to think that Penfield had to be committed as a physical scientist to the assumption that the physical world is *universally* (in *every* context) causally closed, where universal causal closure entails that the relevant brain (neural) events can *only* be causally produced by events of other physical entities and not instead by mental events of immaterial souls alone when they indeterministically choose and intend (plan) to act for purposes. That is, there is no reason to think that because a neuroscientist like Penfield must assume causal closure of a delimited area of the brain in the context of his experimental work in order to discover how physical entities causally interact with each other, that he must also be committed as a scientist to the universal explanatory exclusion of mental events of souls that on certain occasions cause the occurrence of events in the physical world. All that the neuroscientist as a physical scientist must assume is that, during her experiments, souls (either of the patients themselves or of others) are not causally producing the relevant events in the micro-physical entities in the areas of the brain that she is studying. If the neuroscientist makes the universal assumption that in *any* context events in micro-physical entities can only have other physical events as causes and can never be causally explained by mental events of souls and their purposes, then she does so not as a scientist but as a *naturalist*, where a naturalist is a person who believes that the occurrence of physical events can *only* be explained in terms of the occurrence of other physical events and without any reference to ultimate and irreducible purposeful explanations.

If the argument from causal closure fails, then there is one less reason to doubt the truth of the theistic view that God created human persons for the purpose that they enjoy perfect happiness. And finally we can note that because nothing about the practice of science requires the assumption of the universal causal closure of the physical world, science, at least on the grounds considered here, does not exclude God’s (or our own) purposeful creative activity from the world.

Related Topics

Chapter 23: Psychology; Chapter 25: Moral Inquiry; Chapter 28: Arguments from Evil; Chapter 47: Narrative; Chapter 51: Happiness

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Recommended Reading

- Baggini, J. (2004) *What's It All About? Philosophy and the Meaning of Life*, New York: Oxford University Press.
A highly readable book that defends the view that life is a good thing in itself and worth living.
- Eagleton, T. (2007) *The Meaning of Life: A Very Short Introduction*, New York: Oxford University Press. A good book for someone who is trying to understand what one is asking when one asks "What is the meaning of life?"
- Hurka, T. (2011) *The Best Things in Life: A Guide to What Really Matters*, New York: Oxford University Press.
A very readable presentation of the view that the best things in life are pleasure, achievement, virtue, and friendship.
- Kekes, J. (2010) *The Human Condition*, Oxford: Clarendon Press. Defends the view that we have some limited control over our well-being in a world that does not care about us.
- Klemke, E. D. and S. M. Cahn (eds), (2008) *The Meaning of Life*, 3rd edition, New York: Oxford University Press. The best collection of essays on the question of life's meaning.
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